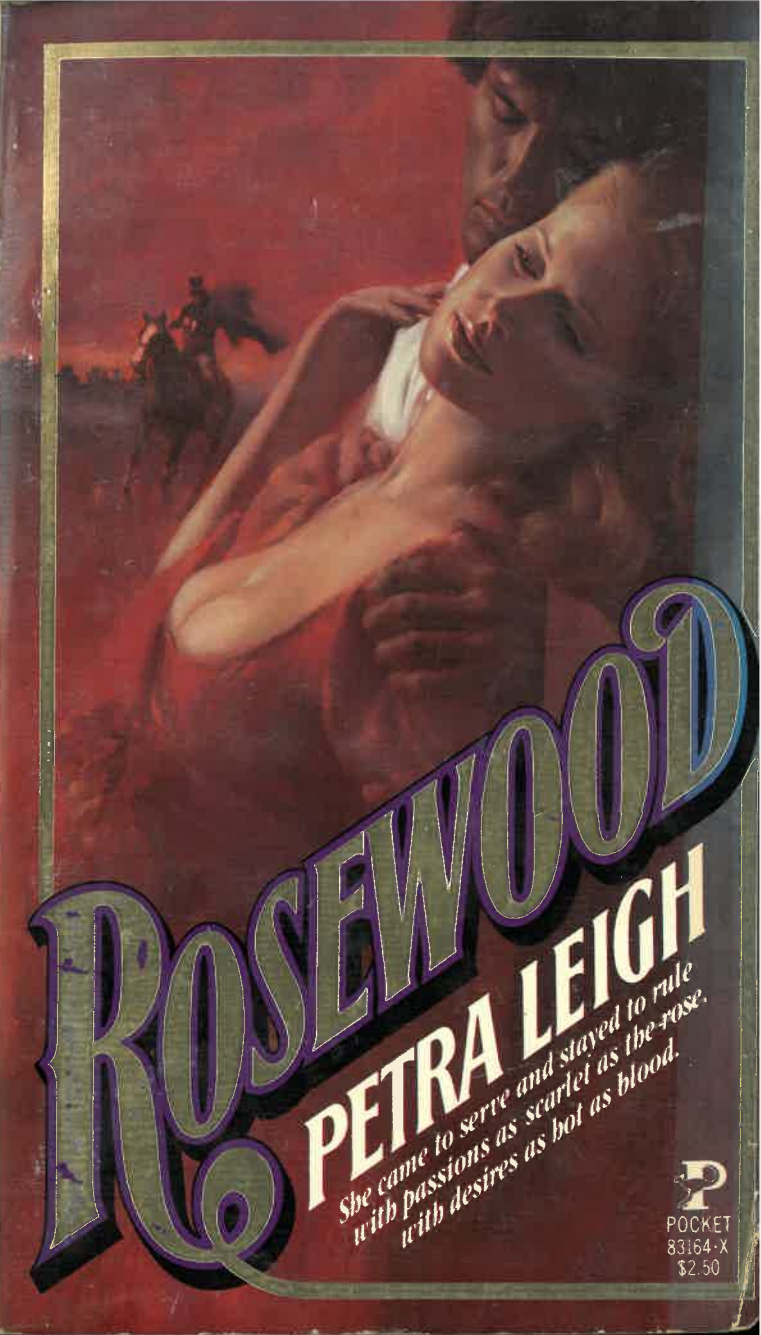




ROSEWOOD

PETRA LEIGH

*She came to serve and stayed to rule
with passions as scarlet as the rose,
with desires as hot as blood.*



POCKET
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**BALANCED BETWEEN
ECSTASY AND ANGUISH . . .**

They waltzed with abandon in Brussels
while Napoleon challenged his fate. But the war
would come between dashing
Major-General Brock Savage and his beautiful
wife, Garnet—war and the ravishing
Cassandra Mayne, destined to become Garnet's
close confidante and Brock's personal,
passionate Waterloo.

Brock Savage, soon to be knighted for his heroism
against Napoleon, was about to embark
on the battle for his life—and his soul—on the
home front at Rosewood Hall. How could he
tell his beloved Garnet the truth about this woman
they called "The Witch," this "governess"
who came to divide and conquer,
leaving in her wake a legacy of infamy, lust,
blackmail and murder . . .

**IN A HOUSE DIVIDED BY
JEALOUSY AND HATE.**

HIGH PRIESTESS OF PASSION

"How does it feel," she repeated in a throaty purr, "How does it feel to be so helpless?"

Then she raised one soft, feminine hand—and slapped him across the face with all her strength, so that his head jerked sideways, and the blow left a livid mark across his cheek.

"That's your punishment," she continued, in the same low tone. "And believe me, your suffering has only just begun . . ."

With infinite care, she drew apart his garments, exposing the most private area of his body to her scrutiny, and never ceasing to stroke him and stimulate him with exquisite skill.

He began to shudder convulsively, while strange whimpering sounds emerged from his throat. He could not endure another minute of this torment—not another second—

She threw back her head and laughed in reckless triumph: "You're all mine now, do you understand that? You *belong* to me!"

PETRA LEIGH
ROSEWOOD



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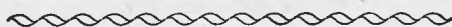
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Part One



New World...

Chapter One

WEDDING NIGHT

"Take your dress off," said Gerard.

"Here? Now?" Coral stared at him.

"Don't argue, my love—take it off."

"But we're in church! For shame, Gerard . . ." she protested.

"I'm sure God almighty would prefer you to undress in His house, rather than catch your death of cold. . . . Stop looking shocked, and hurry up."

It was true enough; Coral was shivering uncontrollably, and her bedraggled dress was wet through. She and Gerard had made their way to this empty church for shelter from the pouring rain, and finding no one about, had slipped through a half-open door into the sacristy. Thankfully, they discovered a pot-bellied iron stove with a few sticks of wood burning in it, and there they huddled together, trying to get warm. But they were both soaked to the skin, their icy garments holding them in a corpse-like embrace.

"Come—do as I do—hang your clothes up to dry, and exercise your limbs to get some feeling back into your body," Gerard advised.

As he spoke, he was already peeling off a sodden shirt, and stripping down a deplorably muddy pair of breeches. Coral looked at his strong thighs, at the thin drawers that clung to his loins, revealing his manhood; and she felt an involuntary spasm of desire.

She busied herself with the buttons and laces of her gown, working with numbed and trembling fingers, and reflected how strange it was, that even in her

ROSEWOOD

wretched plight—cold, hungry, homeless and penniless—she could still feel an irresistible tug of passion when she was near Gerard.

As if reading her thoughts, he glanced across at her, and watched with tender pride as she stepped out of her long skirt. Their eyes met, a flash of complete understanding passed between them, and she found herself returning his smile.

In spite of everything, they were together, they were in love, and nothing else really mattered.

New Orleans, at the beginning of the year 1815, was not a hospitable place for two runaways. The weather was unfriendly, to say the least; and the citizens were suspicious and unhelpful, for the invading British troops were massing for an attack only a handful of miles away, and British ships were off the coast, ready to back them up with naval artillery. Under siege, New Orleans sat tight, and put its trust in God and the commander of the American forces, General Andrew Jackson. This might be the last battle in the long struggle for independence, and the people of Louisiana were determined not to be beaten.

Coral pulled her shift over her head, and as she raised her arms, her breasts—wet and glistening, pearl-pink in the half-light from the stove—lifted eagerly, and Gerard moved closer.

“Give me your clothes—I’ll spread them out upon this bench, with mine. . . . And now kiss me.”

She turned and stared at him, her lips parting in surprise. “Gerard, no, we can’t—we must not—”

She said no more, for he had his arms about her slim waist, and he pulled her to him; his mouth closed upon hers, and her lips received the sweet, teasing salute of his tongue.

She struggled briefly, then surrendered to his ardor, as she had done so many times before.

“I told you we must exercise our limbs,” he whispered wickedly, and his warm breath at her ear excited her, despite her objections.

"We are in *church*—you're mad—" she gasped; but even as her mind warned her of the risk they ran, her body betrayed her. She clung to her lover as if she could never be separated from him, drawing warmth and comfort and joy from his embrace.

"My darling Coral . . ." His voice was low and thrilling, and the tip of his tongue traced the delicate outline of her ear. She shivered again, but not, this time, from the cold. "I want you—*now*. . ."

She was helpless and she knew it; nothing could stop this overpowering feeling that swept through her body—nothing . . .

"*Mon dieu!* Sacrilege! How dare you profane this sacred place!" exclaimed an outraged voice with a marked French-Creole accent.

They sprang apart, and presented an amazing spectacle to the outraged gaze of the newcomer: Gerard, clad only in an apology for an undergarment, his sex clearly aroused under the ragged cotton; and Coral, naked to the waist, with her breasts rising and falling swiftly as she gasped for breath, and her nipples, salmon-pink and shapely as two rosebuds, were pointed and erect, stimulated by desire.

Père Bernard, the young parish priest, had never seen such a display of wanton sensuality, and he averted his eyes in horror. "Get out of here! Get dressed and leave immediately, or I shall call for the military to have you arrested!"

(For the city was under martial law, in its hour of trial, and the troops had absolute command over the civilian population.)

Dismayed, Coral grabbed at her clothes and tried to put them on, but they were still wet, and she could not disentangle them.

"Stop—take no notice," said Gerard crisply. "Father, we have nowhere to go, and as you see we are soaking wet. We came to God's house for shelter; can you really turn us out?"

"You came here to fornicate!" snapped the priest,

his cheeks burning hotly, and he turned away, so that he might not be seduced by the vision of Coral's loveliness.

"Fornicate?" repeated another voice. "What kind of word is that, on the lips of a pious man, *mon père*?"

They were all startled afresh, as a newcomer stepped into the room.

She was not in her first youth, but painted and powdered so cunningly, coiffured with such skill, and dressed in furs, silks and velvets with such an air of elegance, that she could still pass for a dazzling beauty.

Now she put down her wet parasol, threw back the collar of her damp cloak, raised the veil from her face to her feathered bonnet, and said: "And what the devil is going on here, may I ask?"

"Madam, you have no right to intrude—I must ask you to leave," began the priest, tight-lipped.

"What nonsense. . . . As the young man says, this is God's house. I have as much right to be here as anyone else," she announced, and there was a deep, vibrant tone in her voice that hinted at a dash of color in her blood; for she was—like many a lovely Creole woman in New Orleans—what was called "high yellow."

"My name's Violette," she announced, holding out her hand in a gesture of friendship. "Père Bernard and me are old friends, though we don't always see eye-to-eye—but don't you pay no mind to him. . . . Who are you?"

Gerard took her hand and kissed it. "My name's Mallory," he replied. "Gerard Mallory. And I'm pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Well, that's a pretty speech, Mr. Mallory—and one of the most decorous kisses I ever received from a naked man!"

She glinted a mischievous smile at him and passed on to Coral, who stood holding her shift modestly in front of her, uncertain and ill at ease. "And aren't you

going to introduce me to this pretty young creature?"

"Of course. My friend—and my love—Miss Coral Maguire."

"The pleasure's mine, Miss Coral. Here, take my cloak and put it around you, to spare the poor Father's blushes . . ."

Madame Violette draped the cloak around her shoulders, and Coral welcomed the soft warmth that enfolded her.

"You ain't from these parts—I can tell that by your talk—so where do you come from?"

"From Ireland, Madame," said Coral, feeling a little more sure of herself. "My uncle is Dermot Maguire, the actor-manager. . . . Perhaps you've heard of Maguire's celebrated troupe of touring players?"

"I can't say I have—but I don't get out much in the evenings." Violette winked at Père Bernard, who sighed and pursed his lips. "So you're both actors—is that right?"

"Coral is an actress—and a very fine singer," Gerard began.

"And Gerard was playing leading roles with the company until he got caught up by the English army in Washington, and taken off to serve as a soldier!"

The priest gave a horrified exclamation: "What are you saying? Do you mean to tell me you are a British soldier—one of the enemy—?"

"Certainly not," Coral corrected him. "Gerard never wanted to fight for the English—and when I found him again at last, after I'd traveled the length and breadth of the land looking for him, he decided to throw in his lot with me and give up soldiering."

"Are you telling me he is a deserter?" Père Bernard asked, sharply. "How do we know that you are not telling lies? This man may be a spy, for all we can tell—"

"Horsefeathers," snapped Violette. "Didn't you hear? They're a pair of good Irish Catholics on the run from the English, and they need a helping hand."

ROSEWOOD

"Well, Coral's Irish, certainly, but—" Gerard began.

"We both are," Coral broke in swiftly, silencing him with a look.

"But what are you doing in this church? What do you want?" demanded the priest.

"That's very simple, Father. We want to be married," said Gerard, and he began to pull on his clothes as best he could. "I may not be dressed for the role of bridegroom, but it's the part I wish to play. So we are here to ask you to perform your holy office . . . Isn't that right, Coral?"

They looked at each other and smiled. Violette's sentimental heart melted at the sight of these two ragamuffin babes-in-the-wood, and a plan began to form in her mind, while Coral answered softly: "Oh, yes, we want to be married. As soon as possible."

"This is most irregular," protested the priest. "Do you have papers? Authority? Identification?"

"What more authority do you need?" asked Violette. "You can see they love one another—it's shining out of their eyes—and it strikes me that if you don't wed them pretty darn quick, they'll bed together right here and now. . . . So if you refuse to help them, you'll be the cause of them committing a mortal sin!"

"I hardly think I need your instruction on mortal sin, Madame," sniffed Père Bernard. "I can't imagine what you are doing here in any case—"

"You know I like to come in and sit before the altar, to visit with the good Lord every now and again. It's kind of peaceful, and it gets me out of the house for a while. . . . That's what I was doing, when I heard all this shouting and carrying-on back here. But now it strikes me you're going to need my help."

"*Your* help?" The priest looked suitably scornful.

"Oh, you'd be surprised how helpful I can be," said Violette. "For a start—this poor young creature ain't dressed in any fit style for her wedding day. You come across the road with me, Miss Coral, and I'll

NEW WORLD . . .

fix you up with a white dress for the occasion. It won't take us but five minutes, and we'll be right back. . . . And *then* you're going to need me as a witness, so everything can be signed and sealed, all correct and official. Ain't that so, Father?"

"Certainly I shall require the presence of a witness," Père Bernard began stiffly, "but—"

"But nothing! Get out your marriage lines, and light the candles. We'll be back in ten minutes. Oh, for goodness' sake, I almost forgot. . . . You'll need a wedding ring."

Coral opened the cloak a little, just enough to disclose the thin silver chain she wore about her neck. From the chain, a fragile crucifix swung in the soft valley between her breasts; and hanging on the crucifix was a plain gold ring.

"I have it here," she said shyly. "Gerard gave it to me long ago—and I've kept it in readiness till this moment."

Madame Violette was almost as good as her word: Gerard dried out his ragged clothes as well as he could, and waited impatiently, while the confused parish priest hemmed and hawed and prepared for the ceremony—and in not more than half an hour the ladies returned.

Coral had scrubbed her face and pinned up her hair; she was dressed in a long, straight gown of white lace, and—in place of a wedding veil—she had a lace stole draped over her copper-colored curls. Gerard looked at her and felt his heart jolt with the sheer breathtaking shock of her beauty. He was certain that she had never looked so exquisite.

The ceremony was brief; Père Bernard muttered the Latin ritual, then translated the vows into English, and Gerard took Coral's hand as they repeated the familiar words, promising themselves one to another, for as long as they might live.

Then he slipped the ring on her finger, and the deed

ROSEWOOD

was done. Mr. and Mrs. Gerard Mallory were man and wife.

"And now you're coming back with me to my house," Violette announced firmly, as she signed her name to the marriage certificate with a flourish. "Father, will you join us for a little wedding breakfast?"

"I think not, thank you," he replied primly, and handed over the scrap of paper to Gerard. "But I wish you both well. . . . And I trust that your married life may proceed in a more orthodox manner in the future!"

Gerard and Coral left the church together, escorted by Madame Violette. The rain had given over at last, and a watery sun was trying to break through the winter clouds.

"Happy is the bride that the sun shines on," Violette repeated cheerfully. "That's a good sign, anyhow. This way, Mr. Mallory, my house is only a few steps away."

The house itself took Gerard by surprise. It was larger than he had expected: an imposing establishment on three floors, with two staircases curving up left and right from the main entrance hall, and a palatial parlor leading off to one side.

"This is all yours—?" he asked.

"It's kind of roomy, I know, but it's home to me," Violette replied blandly. "The fact is—I run the place as a business, too."

"Madame Violette was telling me about it. It's not a house really, it's a private hotel," Coral explained.

"Well—I said it was *like* a hotel, honey," Violette reminded her. "But we do let rooms, sure enough. . . . Come in and be introduced to some of my regulars."

Gerard followed her into the parlor, then paused at the doorway in surprise.

An assorted group of young ladies—some black, some white, the rest of every shade in between—sat around the room reading, or sewing, or playing solitaire. One girl was at the piano, playing a dance tune,

and they all looked up with interest at the newcomers.

"Girls, these are our new friends—Mr. and Mrs. Mallory—Gerard and Coral. . . . They've come to stay with us for a while. They got married just half an hour ago, at the little church across the way."

The girls greeted this information with rapturous enthusiasm and welcomed the newlyweds warmly, all talking at once.

Gerard tried to make himself heard above the chatter, saying to Violette: "It's very kind of you, Madame, but we really can't accept your invitation. We have no money—and anyway—"

"Who said anything about money? I tell you, you're here as my guests! You've nowhere else to go, have you?"

"Well, no, but—" Gerard looked around the assembled group, and his eye took in the large oil painting that dominated the parlor. A conversation piece, in which Paris pondered how to award a golden apple among three nude goddesses—ladies whose divine charms, amazingly detailed, suggested that they had some earthly qualities as well.

"That's what I thought. So stop arguing, and stay here—we'll give you one of our best bedrooms, I promise you. . . . And not only that—your little bride tells me you're a piano player—is that so?"

"Yes—I do play, to accompany her when she sings—"

"In that case, I'll give you a job, by way of a wedding present, Mr. Mallory. After tonight, you can make yourself useful, playing to my girls and their—ah—escorts. We ain't had a musician here since poor blind Rufus got shot—and you're a whole lot better-looking!"

"Oh, but—" Gerard was amused and flattered, but a little anxious too. "Coral might not like—I mean—"

"I already talked to her while she was getting dressed, and she likes it just fine. You want to earn a

little cash, and support your wife, don't you? Well, then, this is your big chance!"

After that, Gerard really had no alternative: and something in the situation appealed to his sense of humor.

That night, when he and Coral retired to their room, she was still bubbling with excitement. They had had a sumptuous dinner with their generous hostess in her private drawing room, and now they were getting ready for bed.

"Isn't this a wonderful place? Aren't we lucky to have found it?" she caroled as she unpinned her hair, and let her curls flow down her back in a chestnut cascade. "Did you ever *see* so many mirrors?"

She sat at the dressing table, brushing her hair and talking to Gerard's reflection in the glass.

"There's even a mirror in the *ceiling*!" she pointed out with amazement. "Why on earth would anyone want to brush their hair while they're lying in bed? But the whole house is like a palace, and this bedroom must be the grandest room of all. . . . Just look at the paintings—and the statues!"

She indicated the gilt-framed decorations—more classical studies of unclothed nymphs, hotly pursued by determined and goatish satyrs—and a white marble Venus who reclined in the alcove between two windows, her shining limbs shamelessly outstretched.

"You don't think that some of the *décor* is slightly—well—unconventional?" Gerard inquired, carefully.

"No—what do you mean? Oh, I know they're nude, and a little bit shocking, but then that's artistic, isn't it? Ireland's so behind the times in that sort of thing."

Coral stood up at last and began to follow the example of the classical ladies who surrounded her, removing her petticoat.

"Besides, it's all perfectly proper in a bedroom, don't you think? After all, that's the right place for undressing, isn't it?" she continued, suiting her action to the words.

Gerard smiled and agreed; he was naked already, lying on the soft double bed, propped up against the pillows and admiring his lovely bride.

She turned toward him, as she removed her remaining garments, and saw that his expectations had aroused him to a high pitch of excitement.

"Gerard, you're shameless, so you are!" she pretended to scold him, but her voice was gentle, and her eyes danced as she approached the bed.

"There's nothing shameful about admiring my own wife, surely?" he asked. "Is it my fault you're so ravishingly beautiful—?"

She sat on the bed's edge and put out a soft hand to touch him.

"We're so lucky indeed," she said, luxuriating in their shared happiness. "To think that only this morning we'd nowhere to go, no hope at all—and here we are, married at last, you with a job to keep us both, and staying in what must be the best hotel in town. . . ."

Her lazy fondling was having a startling effect upon him; he put his hand on her wrist, fearing to be excited too much and too soon.

"It's not exactly a hotel, my love," he tried to explain, but she shrugged aside this nice distinction.

"Well, a boardinghouse, a girls' hostel—whatever you call it," she hurried on. "Some of the girls must be really wealthy, to stay in such a place, and they're very well-dressed too, did you notice?"

She broke off, hearing a peal of shrill laughter from somewhere below and the sound of the piano. Someone was picking out an old song with one finger. There was a buzz of conversation, and then the unmistakable boom of mens' voices, breaking through.

"Oh—Madame Violette takes in gentlemen guests as well. I hadn't realized that. . . ."

Gerard drew his wife toward him: "Never mind the other guests, my darling. This is our wedding night, and the rest of the world can go hang."

ROSEWOOD

They moved together in a wordless embrace, their bodies pressed tightly as if they were striving to become—in the words of the scriptures—"one flesh." His mouth found hers, and his hands began to explore the eternal female mystery.

Somewhere a door slammed. There was the noise of running feet, and someone calling out, more laughter, and then another door banged, near at hand.

"They're making a great deal of noise," Coral murmured faintly. "Do you suppose there's something wrong?"

"Ssh, ssh, forget about everyone else. . . . Tonight there's no one in the world but you and me."

He felt himself ascending toward the moment of fulfillment, and carried her with him as they rolled slowly over on the bed. She was breathing faster now, and when she felt his fingers upon her opening lips, she gave a little moan—she was already moist, impatient to receive him.

"My darling," he whispered with such intensity that she could feel his whole body vibrate against her own. "My wife—"

And at that very moment, when they were about to come together, the bedroom door opened.

In the candlelight, a middle-aged man, with ginger side-whiskers and a bald pate, took two drunken paces into the room. He was fully dressed, down to the waist, but below that his shirttails exposed a pair of naked legs and a great deal of unsightly ginger hair.

Coral gave a choking cry of dismay and hid her face in Gerard's shoulder.

"What the devil? Sorry—my mistake, friends—wrong room!" the stranger stammered, slurring his words.

Over Gerard's shoulder, Coral's eyes widened as she saw yet another intruder enter the bedroom—one of the girls from the parlor below—but now the young lady was clad only in a transparent wrapper that hung

open, revealing her full, ripe breasts and the tightly curled fleece of jet-black curls between her thighs.

"You've had too much brandy, Randy. Come back to bed," she said firmly and dragged the interloper out by the scruff of his neck, slamming the door after them.

"Oh, Gerard—what—who—" Coral was almost speechless.

"My dearest love, I've been trying to find a way to tell you, but now you've found out for yourself. Did you not realize that, thanks to our charming Madame, we are spending our honeymoon in a brothel?"

She uttered a little sob and would have broken away from him, but he held her tightly in his embrace and talked so soothingly—and his lips and hands, arms and legs all conspired to break down any remaining defenses she might have had. This was no time to worry over details. She could not argue, she could only let her senses take control, leading her once more into an endless paradise of love, unfolding moment by moment as her body opened to Gerard's mounting passion, until at last they reached a breathtaking climax together, touching new heights of ecstasy in this, their first act of love as husband and wife.

The next morning, things were rather different. When Coral awoke in Gerard's arms, the memory of the previous night's revelation came flooding back and she sat up in bed, appalled.

"We can't stay here, that's certain," she decided. "We must thank Madame for her kindness and leave at once."

"Don't be so hasty. We're still on our honeymoon—stop talking and lie down again. . . ."

He groped sleepily for her waist, his fingers slipping across her thighs, caressing her hips, trying to lure her back to him.

"No! We must do something—" She pushed his hand away. "Gerard, behave yourself. You know quite

well what I mean. How can we possibly go on living in a house of shame?"

"How can we do anything else?" Gerard argued. "We've nowhere else to go—and I've no money, except what I can earn here by playing the piano. Besides, you *like* Violette, and she likes us too. She'll take good care we're not troubled again by the clients—and anyway, we'll lock the bedroom door in future. We're much better off here than we would be anywhere else."

"I suppose that's true. . . . But I don't approve at all! And especially I don't approve of you working among a lot of loose women. There must be some other work we could get in the city, surely?"

"At a time like this, with the whole place under martial law—never knowing when the British may attack again?"

As he spoke, they both heard a low growl like thunder that set the glass lusters on the candelabra tinkling.

"D'you hear that?"

"Yes—is it a storm coming?"

"Not the sort of storm you mean. It's gunfire from the battlefield. Believe me, my dearest, we should thank our lucky stars that we've found a safe resting place. Let us stay here for the moment—at least until the battle's lost or won."

Coral sighed and wriggled down beside him again.

"I suppose you're right. But whatever would the good nuns say if they could see me now? You remember I was brought up in a convent?"

"Oh, yes—and if the good nuns have any sense, they'll send up a prayer of thanksgiving that you've found yourself in a soft bed, with a loving husband. . . ."

But as the days and nights went by, Coral could not quite accustom herself to their unconventional situation. Each evening she sat in the bedroom, reading or embroidering, and listening to the sound of Gerard

playing the piano in the parlor below. And each night she welcomed him back into her arms with relief, as if he had come through hell itself and emerged untouched.

Meanwhile, out in the cypress swamps and canebrakes along the bayous, the final confrontation between the British and the Americans reached its own grim climax. Rumors sped swiftly throughout the city, and at last, on January 18th, news came that the enemy was in retreat.

The following morning General Jackson wrote to the Abbé Dubourg, asking that a thanksgiving service be held in St. Louis Cathedral, for "the signal interposition of Heaven, in giving success to our arms against the enemy."

The service was held a few days later; and although Andrew Jackson may have wished that their thanks be directed to almighty God, the people of New Orleans had no doubt that they were honoring the gaunt general from Tennessee—"Old Hickory" himself.

Coral and Gerard made their way to the Cathedral, then joined the happy crowds in the Place d'Armes to watch the parade. A ceremonial victory arch had been erected, and the route was lined by a long assembly of high-school girls—"the flower of New Orleans womanhood," as Gerard heard one pompous bystander describe them—each carrying a basket of flowers and representing one of the states and territories in the Union. Two of the senior schoolgirls were waiting on the steps of the Cathedral to receive the general with laurel wreaths, while the entire assembly broke into a fervent, if slightly ragged, rendition of the "Te Deum."

Along the road's edge some carriages had been drawn up to accommodate several leading citizens, and Coral found herself standing beside an open landau with a solitary passenger.

At the conclusion of the anthem this person raised an imperious finger and beckoned to her.

ROSEWOOD

"You have a charming voice, young woman. Allow me to compliment you on your musical talent."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am. Thank you very much." Coral flushed, not sure whether to curtsy or not. The lady—plump, patrician and patronizing—had the air of some minor royalty. But there were no aristocrats in this democratic country, surely.

"Pray, come and sit beside me for a while. Then when the parade returns from the Cathedral you will have a better vantage point," continued the good lady.

"It's very kind of you, ma'am, but I am with my husband, and—"

"Indeed?" The lady looked down her Roman nose and surveyed Gerard. Now that he had spent some of his earnings on new clothes, he cut a very presentable figure. "In that case, I shall be charmed to meet him. There's plenty of room—*my* husband was detained at the bank, and that is why I was forced to come here alone. Poor Mr. Erlinger is a martyr to his duty."

"Your husband works in a bank?" Gerard asked politely as they climbed into the carriage.

"Not exactly that. He owns it," the lady corrected him kindly.

Coral bit her lip; no doubt a banker's wife would pass for royalty in a republic.

"And what do *you* do, may I ask?" Mrs. Erlinger continued.

"My husband is a musician, a pianist," Coral explained quickly. "And I'm a singer—as you were kind enough to notice."

"You're professional musicians? My dear, I thought as much. One can always tell the mark of a true artiste," cooed the lady. "I'm so glad to meet you both. I am passionately devoted to music, and so are all my friends."

"Really? How interesting." Coral's mind raced. "Do tell me, ma'am—since we are strangers to New Orleans—are there any concert halls or theatres where we might perhaps seek an engagement?"

"Alas, life in our beautiful city has been so disrupted of late, I don't know what to advise you. But if you are free to accept engagements, why don't you come and perform for me and my friends? We have a little informal circle of music lovers, who meet regularly in each other's houses. Oh, do say yes!"

"You mean a professional engagement?" asked Coral, hopefully.

"Why, yes, of course—any evening you care to name—"

"That might be difficult to arrange, my dearest," said Gerard warningly. "Don't forget, I am committed elsewhere at present."

"Oh, I'm sure we could come to some agreement about that," Coral began, but she was interrupted.

"Ah, how very fortunate! Here is my husband now—better late than never. . . . Randolph, I want you to meet two wonderful people. This is my husband, Mr. Erlinger."

Mr. Erlinger climbed into the carriage and stopped—transfixed. He was a middle-aged man with ginger side-whiskers and a bald pate. Their recognition was mutual.

"Oh, no—Brandy Randy!" exclaimed Coral, before she could stop herself.

There was a moment of terrible silence, and then Mrs. Erlinger said in a voice like cold steel:

"I beg your pardon? Are you and my husband already acquainted?"

Chapter Two

SAUCE CRÈOLE

They all looked at one another blankly, and a deep color rose from Mr. Randolph Erlinger's neck to his cheeks.

"Certainly not, ma'am," said Gerard a split second later. "We've never been officially introduced, but we—we know of Mr. Erlinger, naturally."

"We know him by reputation," added Coral helpfully.

"Indeed! And is my husband's reputation such that you feel at liberty to call him 'Brandy Randy'?" Mrs. Erlinger asked with icy disdain. "What have you to say to that, Randolph?"

Mr. Erlinger made some gobbling noises, sounding rather like an outraged turkey-cock, but no coherent words emerged.

Once again, Gerard leaped into the breach.

"Every great man is called by an affectionate nickname among the ordinary people," he explained. "Look at General Jackson, the idol of this city, but he's still called 'Old Hickory,' for all that, on account of his weather-beaten countenance. . . . Mr. Erlinger's a public figure, and his Christian name has been shortened to 'Randy' in a spirit of pure admiration and affection—nothing more."

"And 'Brandy' . . . ?" Mrs. Erlinger pursued.

This time Coral herself took up the challenge.

"Mr. Erlinger's reputation as a connoisseur of wines and spirits—of fine living generally—is known

NEW WORLD . . .

far and wide," she suggested. "Just as *you*, ma'am, are famous for your love of music."

"Oh—really? You mean you've heard of me too?" Mrs. Erlinger's ice thawed, and she was all smiles again. "Do you hear that, Randolph? It seems we are quite renowned. Isn't that remarkable?"

"Remarkable, my dear," agreed her husband, breathing again.

"And these two charming young people are talented performers. Isn't it a fortunate chance that I should encounter them in this way? I'm engaging them to give us a little recital one day very soon—"

But before the details could be arranged, they were again interrupted by the triumphal procession from the Cathedral, and her voice was drowned in the clamor of cheering and bugle blasts and anthems.

So began a strange double life for Gerard and Coral.

Mrs. Erlinger was as good as her word. After the first afternoon *musical* at her house, she was kind enough to pass the young couple on to her friends, and for several weeks they performed regularly before the admiring cultured matrons of New Orleans.

Each time, Coral gave a short song recital—a few established arias from the last century, interspersed with French chansons and old Irish ballads—and between each set of selections Gerard provided a brief solo upon the pianoforte. (He often recalled his childhood music lessons on the old instrument at Rosewood, the home of the Mallorys, and marveled to think that although it had been only a few years ago, it seemed like a different lifetime—and was, in fact, half a world away.)

After every recital, the artists were applauded, complimented and sent on their way with a discreet envelope containing their fee. They never revealed their present address to these generous patrons, preferring to leave the actual whereabouts of their lodgings cautiously vague. When asked, they used to reply that

they were "staying with family friends—on the other side of town."

They also contrived that all their performances should take place in the afternoon, since it was "inconvenient" for them to venture forth at night. This explanation was readily accepted—because, although a glorious victory had been won over the English troops, the war itself had not yet come to an end. Martial law was still in force in the city, which included an occasional curfew and made night promenades rather hazardous.

General Jackson, the hero of the hour but a short time ago, began to lose his popularity. If the Americans were winning, why could he not relax some of these restrictions? But "Old Hickory" maintained his reputation as a disciplinarian and kept a tight control on the populace. Grumbling, they chafed under his stern regime—but they had to obey.

Admittedly, the curfew seemed to make little difference to the flow of clients at Madame Violette's establishment. Despite Coral's repeated pleas that they could now surely afford to move into a more select neighborhood, and her demands that Gerard resign his post as Madame's piano player, he refused to give up a lucrative, regular income. Truth to tell, perhaps he was enjoying his equivocal position in the household more than a little.

"You *like* it—I know you do, so don't pretend!" Coral burst out indignantly one night, when they lay in bed together—or rather *on* the bed, gazing up at the mirrored ceiling that reflected their naked limbs entwined upon the white sheets, in the soft glow of candlelight.

"Dearest love, don't be so provoking—let me stop your mouth with kisses, so you shan't slander me any more." Gerard smiled, pulling her face tenderly toward his own.

"No, you shan't—I won't let you! I declare, men are all alike . . . you've no love or loyalty in you. All

you think of is your pleasure, and you make eyes at every pretty girl who passes by. And as for those shameless creatures downstairs—the way they flirt with you is a disgrace!”

She pulled away, and rolling over so that he could not kiss her, buried her face in the pillows.

“Well, at least they’re more honest than that fawning pack of snobs you like to call your friends,” Gerard retorted. “I’m sick of being petted and praised as if we were a pair of performing lapdogs. . . . And I’m sick of all the pretense we have to keep up.”

“What pretense? What do you mean?” Her voice was muffled.

“You always tell everyone *we* are Irish—and you know very well I’m no more an Irishman than I’m a Hottentot!”

“If we told them you were English, they’d most likely have you shot as an enemy spy. We have to be *tactful!*” she protested.

“And was it tactful for us to be married in a Catholic church when I’m a good God-fearing Protestant of the Church of England, with no allegiance to your Romish Pope? I’d have thought *that* bit of tact would stick in your gullet, you wicked young woman. . . . Are you sure we’re not still committing some mortal sin every time we lie together, after a false marriage ceremony?”

She raised her head furiously.

“It was *not* false! We were married in the eyes of God and in a proper legal way—we’ve the paper to prove it—and if you’re still such a great fool as not to see the difference between the true Church and your muddled old half-and-half religion, more’s the pity—but God will be merciful to you, for you’re suffering from invincible ignorance and He’ll forgive you ’cos you don’t know any better!”

“Ignorant, am I?” Gerard looked at his lovely wife’s reflection, upside down above his head; and the spectacle of her nude back, rising to the twin curve of

her rounded hips, was all too tempting. "Take that for your impudence, woman—!"

And he gave her a sharp slap upon her pretty pink rump. She squealed and tried to fight back, but he swung one leg across her thighs, and threw his weight across her, pinning her down, and at the first contact between their bodies, he felt his own passion mounting yet again.

"I can't move—" she panted, half angry, half laughing, as her soft flesh rippled under him, and her yielding curves molded to the pressure of his loins.

"Don't try to move. Stay like that, you little witch, your magic works its spell upon me from every angle, and in every possible way. . . . Let me enjoy you as you are now."

For their honeymoon was still as intense as ever, and each day and night they seemed to find new delights and variations in their lovemaking.

A few days later, a letter arrived for Mr. and Mrs. Mallory from Mrs. Erlinger—or rather, an invitation, requesting their presence at a dinner party to be held the following week at the Erlinger mansion. This time they were to attend not as performers, but as honored guests, and Coral was delighted.

"You see, Gerard—they don't just think of us as parlor entertainers. We've been accepted as equals!" she exclaimed.

"*Equal*—to that shallow crew of snobs?" Gerard, dressing to go downstairs for his usual evening turn of duty at the keyboard, snapped out the words with contempt. "Anyway—we can't go—I've got my job to do here each night."

"Oh, I'm sure Madame would let you have an evening off, for once in a way," Coral urged him. "Do say yes—I haven't been out at night for ever so long. It's all very well for you, playing the piano and ogling those half-dressed hussies. You never spare a thought

for me, sitting up here night after night with nothing but my books or my embroidery frame!"

Gerard agreed that her social life did leave something to be desired, and finally promised he would speak to Madame about it; but when he took his place at the piano stool a little later, he was surprised to find a visitor awaiting him.

Mr. Randolph Erlinger, looking very uncomfortable, detached himself from a little bevy of girls, and sought Gerard out.

"Before you start to play, I'd like to have a word with you, Mallory," he began.

"With pleasure, sir. I don't believe I've seen you under this roof since that unfortunate occasion when you mistook our room for—"

"Harrumph! We won't go into that, if you please. . . . I decided it might be less compromising for all of us if I stayed away from this house once I'd met you and your delightful wife—under different circumstances."

"Your sensitivity does you great credit, sir," said Gerard politely.

"Yes—well, it's not as easy as all that. . . . I have one or two friends here, you understand—young ladies whom I am accustomed to visit on a more or less regular basis, and these past few weeks, it's been—well—dammit, it's not easy for a man to give up *everything*. . . ."

"You have my deepest sympathy, Mr. Erlinger," Gerard assured him. "Let me tell you—life here isn't easy for us either. Why, only today we received an invitation to your home for dinner, which will mean that I must forgo an evening's employment here in order to accept—"

"Ah, yes—I was just coming to that. About the dinner party," Mr. Erlinger broke in. "I explained to Mrs. Erlinger that it might be tricky for you both to get across town after dark, and she came up with a splendid idea. She suggests that it would be simpler for

you and your wife to leave your present accommodations—of course, she has no idea where that is!—and move into a spare suite of rooms at our house instead. She's offering to put the guest wing at your disposal."

"And you'd be happy for us to do that?" asked Gerard, surprised.

"Mr. Mallory, I would be overjoyed," replied Mr. Erlinger fervently. "Don't you see—once you and Mrs. Mallory move out of this place, there'll be no further embarrassment for any of us?"

"Ah, I understand. You mean you could revert to your old habits and come here as often as you pleased—without the risk of running into us on the stairs?"

"You're a man of the world, sir. You sum up my situation exactly. Well, Mr. Mallory, how about it?"

Gerard could not give an immediate answer; he had, in all fairness, to talk it over with Coral. His own preference was for them to stay put, as they were; but he realized that she would welcome the chance to move into less bizarre surroundings. On the other hand, Madame Violette had been kindness itself, and it seemed ungrateful to leave her so unceremoniously.

In the end, they decided that they would stay with the Erlingers on the night of the dinner party, as an experiment, to see how they enjoyed the change of scene. If the experiment proved to be a success, they would consider moving away from Madame Violette for good.

Coral could hardly wait for the great night. Though she was far from being a snob—as Gerard, who had seen her against the background of her bohemian, theatrical family, was the first to appreciate—she could not help feeling envious of the fine dresses, the splendid trappings of luxury she knew she would be enjoying, even if only for a few hours.

"I *know* money can't buy happiness," she told Gerard, as they prepared to leave for the party, "but it will be such fun to see what it feels like to live in style

—just for a while. . . . Even Cinderella had her fling, until the clock struck twelve!”

Secretly, in her heart of hearts, she was dreaming a little dream. If tonight was a success and the invitation to stay should be extended indefinitely, she had a vision in which she pictured Gerard established as a leading citizen, among the elite of New Orleans—with herself at his side, as his cherished wife and companion, perfectly gowned, decked in jewels, gliding effortlessly through the social whirl of balls and theatre parties and musical evenings—the uncrowned queen of Louisiana society.

After all, her sister Rosalie had married well, not so very long ago. Rosalie had everything she could desire; a French count who worshiped her for a husband, seemingly unlimited money, a house in Paris. . . . Why shouldn't Coral sample a little of that glittering, glamorous life, too?

The evening at the Erlingers began very well.

Violette had been pleased that her little protégés were going out to enjoy themselves for once, and she had lent Coral a silk ball dress and a sparkling necklace of emeralds that brought out the color of her brilliant green eyes and showed off her copper hair to perfection.

When she entered the Erlingers' salon on Gerard's arm, she heard a gasp of admiration—and she glowed with satisfaction. The next moment of excitement came when the Mallorys were presented to the guests of honor, none other than General Andrew Jackson himself, together with his wife, Rachel.

The great man said very little—he was not by nature a talkative character—and his face was grimly set as he shook hands with each of the guests as they were presented; but there was no doubt that he *was* a great man, and the Mallorys could not but be impressed. Gerard had heard the rumor that after his

ROSEWOOD

triumph in New Orleans, "Old Hickory" might well be a candidate for the presidency someday.

As Coral studied the general, she racked her brains; he reminded her of someone . . . those piercing eyes, that weatherbeaten complexion, the traces of an old scar, running from the side of his head to—

She suddenly realized who it was; although Jackson was as American as the eagle itself, for an instant something about him recalled that other leader of men whom she had met once, and that briefly, at British headquarters among the bayous—Major General Brock Savage, who had now become her brother-in-law; the husband of Gerard's sister Garnet.

But if Andrew Jackson was a giant among men, his wife was the complete opposite. Short, plump, homely—a little dumpling of a woman—Rachel Jackson was so forthright and simple, no one could be in awe of her. As garrulous as her man was taciturn, she kept up a running commentary, bubbling with good humor and high spirits.

" . . . What was your name again, my dear? Coral—my, that's a pretty name, and it certainly does suit you. You have a pretty wife, Mr. Mallory. . . . You're from out of town? *Ireland*—? My goodness, that's a long way off. You make me feel like a real homebody. I never did see anyplace bigger than Nashville, till the general sent for me to come here and join him. . . . Have you ever been in such a busy city before? All the balls and concerts and plays we're invited to—but there, the general's so occupied, we don't have time to attend the half of them. . . ."

She chattered so spontaneously, with such infectious enjoyment, that Coral and Gerard could not help sharing in her enthusiasm, and they were quite sorry, upon entering the dining room, to find that the Jacksons were far away from them, placed in a position of honor at the head of the table.

But the conversation around them was, nevertheless, devoted almost entirely to the general and his lady.

The men murmured behind their hands to one another, and Gerard became aware that if Andrew Jackson's popularity had declined after the famous thanksgiving celebrations, it had now sunk to new and unplumbed depths.

" . . . High-handed; arrogant bully," one of the guests was remarking in tones pitched too low to reach the head of the table. "His behavior toward Louaillier is nothing short of monstrous. More like a vindictive savage than a civilized gentleman . . ."

"Why, what's he done?" Gerard inquired. "And who's Louaillier?"

"My dear sir, I realize you're a stranger here, but did you not hear of the article in the *Louisiana Courier*? Philip Louaillier wrote it, criticizing the general and some of his decisions, and damme if Jackson didn't take advantage of the martial law to have the poor fellow arrested as a traitor!"

"Not only that—" Someone across the table leaned forward eagerly and added further details. "Judge Hall felt sorry for Louaillier and had him released on grounds of habeas corpus—and what d'ye suppose? Old Hickory was so gosh-darned mad, he ordered them *both* to be arrested, on the charge of abetting and exciting mutiny, and had 'em thrown into a cell together! Well, you can't get away with that kind of tyranny in these parts. There'll be the devil to pay for it later, you mark my words!"

Coral and Gerard exchanged glances. They had both instinctively liked and admired the general's personality, and this undercurrent of hostility against the guest of honor—hostility all the more reprehensible, in that no one seemed to have the courage to come into the open and protest publicly—made them uneasy.

Still, the dinner passed off without incident, the food and wine were as delicious as Coral had anticipated—there was a baked ham—studded with cloves and gilded till it shone like pure gold—that made Rachel

ROSEWOOD

Jackson exclaim with admiration and clap her hands, and there was a local delicacy—Louisiana seafood on a bed of rice, the shrimp and shellfish in a hot tangy sauce créole, with peppers and chilis and all kinds of spices.

When the dishes were cleared away, Mrs. Erlinger signaled to her husband and suggested that the ladies should repair to the salon once again, leaving the men—in European style—to talk politics over their brandy and cigars.

The ladies arose like a flock of gorgeously plumed birds and made their way into the other room, where they settled themselves for a cozy buzz of conversation.

It was only after a while that Coral observed how Rachel Jackson had been isolated. She seemed to be in the main group, but was not *of* the group. Gradually Coral noticed that the tide of small talk eddied around the homely little woman, like surf breaking on a rock. No one addressed her, and—worse—when she herself addressed any of her fellow guests, she was ignored.

“Do tell me, what do you put in that tasty sauce créole?” she asked Mrs. Erlinger directly.

The hostess hesitated, and then turned her back upon the lady to continue gossiping with her friends.

Coral bit her lip as she saw the confusion and humiliation in Mrs. Jackson’s face. She saw too that this treatment was not altogether new to her. She was accustomed to being snubbed in this way.

Impulsively, Coral turned to the lady sitting next to her—another society matron, in whose home she and Gerard had given a recital only a few days ago—and asked quietly: “How can Mrs. Erlinger treat a guest so? Why is she being so horribly rude to the general’s wife?”

“My dear, the general himself is not overpopular in the city right now,” came the reply. “Of course we’re forced to be polite to *him*, as long as he’s in command. But we don’t have to truckle to his concubine!”

"Concubine?" Coral stared at her. "You mean, she's not his wife?"

"Oh, I believe they're married now, technically speaking, but they weren't always. She used to be married to another man—Robards, his name was—and she got a divorce."

"A divorce?" As a good Catholic, Coral could not approve of the breaking of a marriage, and yet her heart went out to the sad, homely figure in the midst of so much vicious gossip. "But at least under your law that's permitted, surely?"

"Maybe so, and maybe not. For the fact is, she and the general set up house together before her divorce was final. They were living in sin, and that's why no respectable married woman in this city wishes to make the acquaintance of Rachel Robards Jackson—"

Mrs. Jackson heard her own name cutting through the babble quite clearly. She lifted her head, but her expression did not change; by now she was quite used to being talked about. Only Coral noticed the light in her eyes, as it dwindled and died.

Suddenly, to her own surprise, Coral found herself upon her feet, and she found too that she was speaking—to her hostess, and to the room in general.

"I should like to go now, Mrs. Erlinger. I should like you to call my husband, and I should like to leave this house."

She clenched her fists, seeing the astonishment on every face turned toward her; but now she had started, she had to go on.

"And I should like you to know *why* I am leaving. . . . I've never met such a collection of stuffy, stuck-up hypocrites in my whole life. You take exception to someone because she loves her husband and he loves her. You tear her reputation to pieces just because you say they once lived together in sin—"

From the corner of her eye, she saw Rachel Jackson's distress and knew she was only making things worse, but she could not stop.

ROSEWOOD

"Well, all I can tell you is that I applaud the truth and the courage of two people who are prepared to run such risks for the sake of love. . . . I'm not ashamed to tell you that I slept with my husband many, many times before we were married—because I loved him!"

A breeze of shocked whispers began to blow about the room, but still Coral ploughed on recklessly:

"And I'm proud of it, for we've dealt honestly with each other and loved each other with our bodies as well as our souls. And your fine salons and drawing rooms would be a lot happier if you had done the same. As it is, most of your husbands sneak off to a brothel whenever they get the chance, for the kind of warmth and fun they never find at home—and if you ask me how I know, I'll tell you. It's because Gerard and I are living in one of your city's brothels right now!"

By this point, the noise of outrage was so loud that Coral had to raise her voice, and at the same instant the double doors at the end of the salon were flung open. Gerard strode in, pale but determined; Coral was used to making herself heard in theatres of all sizes, and her discourse had carried to the hall outside with perfect clarity.

Ignoring the furious band of ladies, Gerard offered his arm to his wife.

"Come, Cinderella. I think it's time for us to go."

So they went home together. Home—to the brothel.

On the way, as they walked through the darkened streets, a reaction set in, and Coral's bravery ebbed away.

Leaning on Gerard, she began to sob.

"How could I have said such terrible things? I've ruined everything. They'll never offer us any more engagements—their houses will be closed to us from now on—oh, mother of God, I'm such a fool!"

"You lost your temper with them, and high time,

too. We don't need them and their kind. We can earn our living well enough without their charity."

"It's true. You've always hated that side of it—the way they smile and look down their noses—you were right, Gerard, and I was wrong. How could I be taken in by their airs and graces, just because they have a few dollars to throw around? We've done with them now—and good riddance!"

She tried to sound defiant, but later, when she was alone in the bedroom, listening to the sound of Gerard's piano filtering up from the parlor below, she took off her clothes and collapsed on the bed in a miserable heap.

So much for her silly dreams of glamour and success; so much for her hope that they might stay permanently in the Erlinger mansion. She disliked the Erlingers and all they stood for. From this time forth, Coral would always have a deep distrust and resentment toward the people she thought of as "the gentry." And yet something in her yearned for a better way of life—something to hope for, something to dream about. Madame Violette was very kind, and their room was comfortable indeed, and yet . . . She looked around at the erotic paintings and the nude sculpture, and felt that she was in a trap, and she saw no way out of it.

At last she blew out the candle by the side of the bed, and closed her eyes, hoping to escape into a deep, exhausted sleep. How long she slept, she never knew. The next thing she was aware of was the quiet click of the bedroom door shutting. Someone had come into the darkened room.

"Gerard?" she said drowsily.

But there was no reply. Nothing but the sound of a cat-like footfall upon the carpet and the faintest hint of a man's breathing.

It *was* a man, she was sure of that; for she could smell male sweat, and tobacco, and liquor.

At once, she was wide awake.

ROSEWOOD

"Who's there?" she asked tensely. "This is a private apartment. You've mistaken the room—kindly leave at once—"

"Oh, no," said a voice with a thick French-Creole accent. "I think not."

"What do you mean? How dare you—"

She heard him approaching, and the smell of masculinity was even closer now; she could almost feel the warmth of his body. Too late, she realized with horror that she had forgotten to lock her door, and in her exhaustion she had also omitted to put on her nightgown. She was alone in a pitch-dark bedroom with a stranger—quite unprotected and completely naked.

To her amazement, the man chuckled—very quietly, deep in his throat.

"Don't you know who I am, mam'selle?" he asked. "I'm an old friend of yours."

She stared blindly into the blackness, trying to see who was addressing her.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

As if in reply, a flame suddenly spirited into life, as he lit the bedside candle. And she found herself looking up into the face of a swarthy young man with curling black hair, his skin so tanned by wind and weather that he looked almost like a mulatto. He laughed again, showing strong, white teeth.

"Don't you recognize me—even now?" he continued. "Jean Lafitte—at your service."

"Jean Lafitte—the pirate!" she gasped.

The memory came back with a rush now; the voyage to Louisiana, when she traveled by boat in search of Gerard; the landing at Grande Terre, a deserted island in the bay; the house that had seemed at first sight to be empty, and her meeting with this amazing outlaw—Jean Lafitte, the king of the high seas. . . . He had helped her along part of her journey, he had tried to make love to her, and now here he was—the last man on earth she had expected ever to meet again.

NEW WORLD . . .

And she was naked. She recoiled, as his eyes traveled the length of her body; she tried to pull up the sheet from underneath her, and shield herself, but it was impossible. Helplessly, she began to raise her knees, covering her breasts with her hands, and his full, sensual mouth twisted into a mocking smile.

"Get out," she whispered fiercely. "Leave me alone—you have no right to intrude upon me in this way!"

"Is that how you repay the help and kindness I showed you at our last meeting, mam'selle? Oh, I have every right to be here. I am an old friend of Violette, and I always pay my debts . . ."

"What—?" She stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Besides, I think perhaps you owe me an apology, no? The last time we met, you pretended you were a virtuous young lady, and I believed you. Tonight, while I was sitting in the parlor below, I saw you come in and walk upstairs to your room—and I realized that you had fooled me. Come, *chérie*—this time let us not play games." He tugged at his belt, and unfastened it, then threw himself on to the bed beside her, saying:

"You and I are going to do business, mam'selle!"

Chapter Three

BLIND MAN'S BUFF

In the same instant, Coral realized what he had assumed and felt a cold fear clutch her heart.

"No, wait—you're making a mistake—" she began.

But Jean Lafitte wasn't going to be put off so easily.

"You're all ready for me, *chérie*, so I must make haste and present myself to you in the same state of nature." As he spoke, he began pulling off his clothes, throwing aside his jacket and ripping his frilled shirt open, exposing a brawny chest matted with a thick tangle of black curls.

Coral wriggled away from him across the bed, trying to escape and pleading: "Please listen to me. I'm not what you suppose—not at all—"

He laughed heartily, murmuring, "A naked girl in a *maison de joie*? Come, mam'selle, let us have no more fooling."

His tone was friendly enough, but one huge hand grabbed Coral's wrist and he dragged her toward him without mercy. At the same time, his other hand was unbuttoning the flap of his breeches, and she saw with horror that his slim loins, as sinuous as a seal and shining-black with body hair, were wriggling free from the last vestiges of clothing, and his manhood was already springing into life.

"No! Let go of me—I shall scream for help!" she gasped, struggling in his iron grip.

His laughter redoubled, and she found herself being pulled into a hot musky embrace. His arms closed

about her waist, his torso thrust toward her, and his shaggy thighs urged her to surrender.

Terror blended with a strange flash of excitement in her body; she knew that if she ceased to resist, even for one split second, she would be lost.

She fought back as hard as she could, calling upon all the reserves of her Irish gypsy temperament—wrestling, biting, scratching; but this violent reaction did nothing to deter Jean Lafitte. If anything, it only seemed to excite him more; she felt his throbbing masculinity huge and hard against her, as he panted:

"You have a fine, fighting spirit, *chérie*, but I will have you, just the same." Sobbing with frustration, she threshed out wildly, and her arm overturned the bedside candle. Immediately, they were both plunged into total darkness once more, and she heard his voice rumbling deep within his barrel chest:

"Am I so very unsightly you cannot bear to look upon me? So be it, my lady, if that is the way you want it."

With a single convulsive movement, he pushed her back, and flung himself upon her, forcing her to part her legs.

"For God's sake—will you listen to me?" she cried in despair. "I tell you I am not a whore—I am a respectable married woman—"

He seemed to pause for breath, then retorted in a mocking voice:

"Married, eh? A thousand pardons, madame, but what is a respectable married woman doing under this roof? I am amazed your husband permits such a thing!"

With her last ounce of strength, she forced out the words:

"We are here as guests of Madame Violette. . . . Do you not hear the music downstairs? The pianist is my husband. . . ."

This piece of news produced some effect; Jean stopped short, and there was a moment of stillness,

ROSEWOOD

during which the sweet, tinkling notes of the pianoforte could be heard clearly from the floor below.

Coral lay in the darkness, her body spread out beneath the unseen figure of the pirate, poised above her, praying for deliverance.

In the parlor, Gerard brought the little dance tune to a close, and turned around upon the piano stool. There was a lazy spatter of applause: the room was half-empty. Some of the girls were above, entertaining their clients, and the remainder sat about in attitudes of boredom.

"How quiet it is tonight," sighed Camille, a tall, languid octoroon with dyed red hair. "What's the matter with the menfolk of this city? Has everyone perished suddenly—or don't they love us no more?"

"It's the war," Marguerite replied wearily. She lay upon a chaise longue, naked except for a pair of cream silk stockings that showed off her golden skin to perfection, and fanned herself idly. "There's rumors about tonight that the British are in retreat. Most people are staying home, waiting for news."

"Well, I'm sick of waiting!" announced Lili, the fairest of all the girls, with a chignon of blonde hair coiled up on the top of her head, and a long peignoir made of layers of crimson lace that almost—but not quite—hid the nubile figure beneath. "If nobody's coming here to have fun with us, why shouldn't we have a little fun of our own?"

She got up and made her way to the piano.

"Remember how we played games at Violette's birthday party?" she asked. "I thought I'd die laughing that night."

"I believe that was before my time," Gerard explained, as she leaned on the edge of the keyboard and surveyed him with an appraising smile.

"Oh, sure, that was when old Rufus was still working here. . . . He really enjoyed himself that night,

didn't he, Camille? We taught him some fine parlor games, Mr. Mallory!"

"What sort of games?" Gerard asked, feeling a tiny stirring of interest.

"Oh—well, you know the poor fellow was blind? So we played Blind Man's Buff—naturally! What d'ye say we have a little game right now?"

She leaned closer, looking into his eyes; and he saw the spark of mischief glinting behind her long, curling lashes.

Half a dozen of the other girls took up the idea eagerly and gathered around; someone produced a bandanna handkerchief to act as a blindfold, and they persuaded Gerard to leave the piano, leading him to the middle of the floor.

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps we shouldn't—" he protested half-heartedly, as the handkerchief was bound tightly about his eyes.

"It's only a children's game. What's the harm in that?" Lili demanded.

He couldn't back out now; the knot was tied, and he could see nothing. And, if the truth were told, perhaps he didn't altogether dislike the idea of mingling with these bewitching, beguiling young women.

"Turn him around three times!" Lili's voice called out, and he felt himself being spun round by a dozen playful hands. "Now the game is, you have to catch us, one by one, and when you've caught us, you have to guess who we are . . . Ready, steady, go!"

They pushed him away, and he heard whispers and giggles from all directions, and another sound, like the frou-frou of silk or satin, which he could not for the moment identify.

Cautiously, he began to explore the room, moving toward a suppressed ripple of amusement, feeling a hand brush against his shoulder. He turned swiftly, colliding with an armchair, and heard several girls laughing, from all directions. Completely lost, he ventured on, and this time a lucky chance brought him up

against someone; he reached out instinctively and grasped—bare flesh. Nude shoulders; the soft, smooth skin of a slim waist, and appealing, rounded buttocks below.

So that was it. The girls had fooled him by slipping out of their *déshabille*; he was playing Blind Man's Buff with a group of naked, anonymous bodies.

He moved his hands up to the girl's head, hoping to identify her by her hair style; but once again, she had been too clever for him. This girl had unpinned her hair, and it was hanging loose upon the nape of her neck.

"Lili?" he hazarded a guess.

"Wrong!" said Lili's voice, from somewhere at his back, and he heard the little group moving in toward him. "Oh—I forgot to tell you—each time you make a mistake, you have to pay a forfeit. We take off something you're wearing."

"Oh, no—I never agreed to that—" he began to argue.

But he could not appeal against the rules of the game; he felt himself being pounced upon, and the soft, perfumed limbs of the girls surrounded him. Despite his protests, his jacket was removed, and he was spun around yet again, while Lili's voice remarked: "I can't imagine what you're grumbling about. This is the part old Rufus enjoyed the most!"

The unfortunate fact was that in his heart of hearts, Gerard found he was enjoying it too. There was something very provocative in the idea of groping blindly through a room full of lovely women—and he knew they were enjoying it just as much. As they passed him, they touched and tickled him impudently, daring him to catch them.

Again he grasped a warm, lively playmate, and again he could not identify her. To punish him for his second mistake, the girls unbuttoned his shirt, and removed it skillfully. He was half-naked now, and he knew only too well that a third error would cost him

his breeches. He knew too that the excitement was having its inevitable effect upon him; once the girls exposed him below the waist, his condition would be blatantly obvious. And this knowledge, in itself, aroused him all the more.

They were setting themselves upon him from all sides. He felt a hand stroking his chest, and another wickedly exploring his thighs. He could grab any one of these wanton nymphs and challenge her—but if he guessed wrong, he felt certain they would torment him without mercy, and he felt his breeches straining across his loins, almost ready to burst at the thought—

Suddenly there was a silence, a moment of complete stillness, and he sensed that the girls had drawn away from him. What had happened?

He advanced, seeking another prisoner, and in the hush that followed, his arms encountered yet another young lady; but this one was fully dressed.

He drew her into a sightless embrace, and at the same moment, all his other senses told him the truth. Touch, scent, the taste of her lips—even the sound of her voice as she said with careful self-control:

“Well, Gerard. The party’s over.”

He tore off his blindfold, and found himself face to face with Coral. At the door stood a black-haired, dark-skinned young man, dressed like a Southern dandy.

Around him, Gerard was dimly aware of the girls hastily donning their clothes once more and murmuring excuses and explanations; he was well aware of the sorry figure he himself must cut, stripped to the waist, disheveled and sweating.

“It was a game we play to pass the time,” Lili began, confused and more unsure of herself than Gerard had ever known her. “It don’t *mean* nothing—just a bit of fun—”

“*Fun?*” Coral threw the word back as if it were an insult.

“I didn’t realize—I thought you’d gone up to bed—”

ROSEWOOD

Gerard stammered, as he caught the shirt and jacket Camille tossed to him.

"Obviously! As it happens, I—I met a gentleman, an old acquaintance of mine—and I brought him down here to introduce you—" Coral began.

"You met a gentleman—in our bedroom?" Gerard asked, quickly buttoning his shirt.

Coral bit her lip: now it was her turn to be embarrassed.

Jean Lafitte stepped forward, his hand outstretched.

"I am a close friend of Madame Violette, and when I heard that your beautiful wife was in residence here, I could not resist the pleasure of paying my compliments to her. I had the good fortune to be of some small service to her, when she first arrived in Louisiana."

"This is Mr. Jean Lafitte, Gerard. You remember, I told you how he helped me find my way—?"

The two men shook hands warily; but before they could say any more, there was a loud explosion, followed by another, making the chandelier shake and ring above their heads.

"What the devil was that?" Jean asked. "The damned Britishers—have they had the gall to make one last attack?"

Almost immediately, the question was answered. Madame Violette herself bustled into the parlor, with one of the city fathers (looking, it must be said, a little shamefaced) at her side.

"Go on, m'sieu—tell them, tell them all what you have just told me!" Violette exclaimed.

The civic official cleared his throat for the announcement.

"That was the minute gun you heard," he explained, "firing off a signal to inform the city that a peace treaty has been signed. The war is over."

The girls gave a whoop of joy, and Coral turned to Gerard, her face alight with happiness, as they fell in-

to each other's arms. Nothing else mattered at a moment like this.

But that was not all, for the announcement continued.

"Furthermore, martial law has now been revoked. New Orleans is herself once again. The militia has been dismissed; all military prisoners are being released; and General Jackson is to be summoned to appear before the justices for contempt of court!"

It was true; once Judge Hall and Philip Louaillier had been freed, the machinery of justice took its revenge upon Andrew Jackson, and he was charged with contempt for refusing to recognize the writ of habeas corpus issued in respect of Louaillier.

Soon afterward, the proceedings were heard at the courthouse; the case of the United States versus Andrew Jackson.

Gerard and Coral had taken a personal interest in the matter, and through the influence of Jean Lafitte, places were found for them up in the public gallery, along with almost fifty of Jean's friends and relations from the old pirate stronghold of Barataria.

These onetime outlaws, who had finally thrown in their lot with the American forces and allied themselves against the British invaders, had become loyal supporters of the general, and feelings were running very high.

As the trial began, and the justice—Judge Dominick Hall himself—opened the proceedings by charging the defendant, one of Jean's brothers stood up and thumped the gallery rail defiantly, shouting to Andrew Jackson in the dock:

"General, just say the word, and we'll pitch the judge and the whole bloody courthouse into the river!"

Andrew Jackson's lips twitched, but his face was as impassive as ever as he frowned up at his supporters and commanded them to respect the dignity of the courtroom and keep silent.

ROSEWOOD

The trial began, and Judge Hall fired a series of questions at Jackson; but the general declined to answer. He would not explain his actions, nor defend them; he had done what he believed to be right, and he did not propose to equivocate now.

At last the judge gave his verdict; the question, he said, was whether the law should bend to the general, or the general to the law. In view of the attitude of the accused, he concluded that he had no alternative but to impose a fine upon him and sentenced him to pay the sum of one thousand dollars.

A storm of angry protest broke out, but it was immediately quelled by the general himself, who simply inclined his head and said:

"I accept the sentence."

The court was dismissed, and the general's friends and followers did their best to turn the verdict into a personal victory for their leader. A crowd in the street unhitched the horses from his carriage and declared their intention of drawing their hero in triumph through the city.

As Coral and Gerard emerged on the courthouse steps, followed by Jean Lafitte, a uniformed official pushed his way through the throng, and tapped Gerard on the shoulder.

"Mr. Mallory?" he asked.

Gerard stared at the man, puzzled: "That's correct, sir. What do you want of me?"

"You were pointed out to the general in court, sir; he reminds you that he recently had the pleasure of making your acquaintance upon a social occasion, and asks if you will be good enough to accompany him to the Exchange Coffee House, as he wishes to have some further converse with you."

Gerard looked at Coral. "Well, I'd be pleased to do as he asks, only—I have my wife with me, and—"

"That need be no problem," said Jean, easily. "You go with the General and find out what he wants of you."

I will escort Mrs. Mallory back to—ah—your residence.”

So it was arranged; Gerard went off to do as he was bidden, and Jean drove Coral home to Madame Violette’s establishment.

The deserted parlor was in a gloomy half-light when they arrived. Coral pulled up the blinds and opened the jalousies, letting in the sunlight.

“There’s never anyone up and about in this house till noon,” she explained. “I’d offer you some coffee, but—”

“Thank you, I’ve no desire for refreshment,” said Jean. “I should prefer to sit and talk with you, if I may. And I’m glad that Madame Violette’s staff are such tardy risers: of course they must sleep by day, since their working hours are—”

“Please, let’s not discuss Madame, or this house.” Coral turned away, busying herself by taking off her cloak and gloves. “It’s a subject I prefer not to think about.”

“I understand that perfectly, and I apologize.” Jean used his handkerchief to dust the cushions of the chaise longue. “Come, sit beside me and let us talk of something more agreeable.”

She sighed, and sat down, removing her bonnet carefully, and holding it on her lap.

“Oh, dear. I know I shouldn’t be ungrateful to Madame Violette. We owe her a very great deal for all her kindness to us, but, well, I’d give anything to be able to get away from this place. I even wrote to my Uncle Dermot in Washington, hoping he might have work for us there—”

“You have an uncle in Washington?”

“I have an uncle, but it seems he’s no longer in Washington. Well, to be sure, it’s over six months since I last heard of him. He was at the theatre there, but my letter was returned with a note saying he went back to New York, some time before Christmas. Heaven alone knows where he might be by now.”

"I'm sorry that you dislike living in New Orleans so much," Jean said softly, moving slightly toward her upon the chaise longue. "I had hoped you might settle here permanently."

"Oh, no—it's not the city itself I dislike, but living in a place like this, and seeing Gerard employed—well—you saw for yourself how it is, the other night."

"I admit I was astounded that he could behave so thoughtlessly," Jean agreed, with a solemn countenance. "To play at Blind Man's Buff with a parcel of harlots, he must be blind indeed—or mad—to do such a thing."

He edged closer still and let his arm fall along the velvet cushions, behind Coral's shoulders.

"Oh, I didn't *blame* him—it wasn't really his fault—those girls tempted him, you see. But all the same—"

"But how could a young bridegroom be tempted by any other woman, when he is married to the most beautiful creature in the world?" asked Jean.

She turned to him—and found that his face was only a few inches away from her own.

"Mr. Lafitte—for shame!" she exclaimed. "You know very well that sweet-talking is useless. I love my husband dearly."

"But does he love you—quite so passionately?" Jean put his other hand up onto the padded side rest, effectively trapping Coral in the circle of his arms. "As, for instance, *I* would love you . . . if you gave me the slightest encouragement?"

"I have already asked you to wipe out of your memory what passed between us that night upstairs," Coral reminded him, feeling a quickened pulsing in her blood, and a constriction in her throat. "How dare you criticize Gerard's behavior, when you would take advantage of my situation—"

"I did not do so then—and I do not do so now," replied Jean smoothly. "Although every nerve in my body cries out for you, I am making a supreme effort

to master my desires. I have never met any woman like you, Mam'selle Coral, and I will always love you. Tell me if my love is in vain, and I will accept what you say—but understand that I worship you with ten times the passion of your husband, and at the merest sign that you return my feelings, I would pick you up in my arms now and take you away, where no one else should ever find us. . . . I give you my life, *chérie*. It is yours, if you will have it."

She stared into his eyes, so close, so large and lustrous, and felt as if she were being hypnotized.

"No—you must not—" she breathed, faintly. His personality was so strong, she was almost overpowered.

"I will do nothing you do not wish me to do," he continued in the same, level tone. "You see? I am not even touching you. Does that not prove the sincerity of my regard for you?"

It was true; they were not touching. But his arm behind her was a mere inch away from her shoulders, and his strong thighs almost pressed against her leg, while his left hand was curled, fractionally away from her breasts, and his lips, slightly parted, were so close to her mouth that only a breath separated them.

She knew that the very slightest movement from her would draw her forward into his embrace, and then his mouth would be upon her, his strong arms would close around her, and she would drown utterly in the flood of his passion. Without any physical contact between them, this man was now a hundred times more dangerous than he had ever been in the bedroom, when he had been about to rape her.

He was no longer using his male power to conquer her; now he played upon the strength of her feminine emotions.

Time seemed to stand still, then Coral heard herself saying, as if from a million miles away: "You are very gallant. Mr. Lafitte. But I must remind you again that I love Gerard—and I have given myself to him for ever."

ROSEWOOD

Jean Lafitte lifted his arms, and let them fall to his sides in an immense shrug of capitulation.

"He is a fortunate man—and I envy him with all my heart."

Moments later, they heard footsteps, and then Gerard himself hurried into the room. Jean Lafitte rose, bowed, exchanged polite formalities with both Mr. and Mrs. Mallory and left the house. Coral never saw him again.

But she never quite forgot him either; for the rest of her life, at odd moments, the vision of that black pirate with his flashing smile and vibrant masculinity would emerge from the mists of memory, and she would wonder fleetingly what might have become of her if she had given him a different answer.

Once he had gone, Gerard settled down beside Coral and began to give her his news. What, she asked, had the great man wanted with him?

"It wasn't really *me* he wanted. Truth to tell, it was you!" Gerard smiled. "Apparently Mrs. Jackson was in court this morning too, though we never saw her there. But she saw us all right, and she asked her husband to pass a message on to you."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"She wishes to thank you for your spirited defense of her that night at the Erlinger house. She was very touched and grateful. But she also wishes to correct one important misapprehension."

"I don't understand . . ."

"You spoke of her 'living in sin' with the general before her divorce came through. Well, he explained to me this morning that this was a technicality; she had been divorced, before ever they set up house together. They were married in good faith, and it was only afterward that they discovered the divorce had not been finalized. After that, they went through a second marriage ceremony, but even then, charges of adultery were made to them both. Seemingly, although

NEW WORLD . . .

Mrs. Jackson was very proud of the way you defended her, she wanted you to know the truth, too."

"I see. Yes, of course."

"But she felt herself to be indebted to you, and the general wanted to know what he could do to repay your kindness. So, in return, I found myself telling him all our troubles as well. I poured out the whole story."

"What?" Coral stared at him. "You admitted you were English and not Irish?"

"Why not? The war's over—I'm not in danger of being taken up as a spy any longer. I told him how I'd run away to Ireland in the first place and met you and Uncle Dermot—and I also told him how we'd lost all our papers and documents. Except for our marriage lines."

"What did he say?"

"He cracked a smile for the first and last time, and he declared that in that case there was one small service he *could* perform on our behalf. He called for pen and paper, and wrote out this *laissez-passer*—in his official capacity. It authorizes us, in the name of the United States government, to travel freely throughout the land, or to leave whenever we so desire, and return to our own country."

"Oh, Gerard!" Coral flung her arms about his neck and kissed him. "That means we're free to go. We can travel to New York and try to find Uncle Dermot—we can go home!"

That night, Gerard explained the situation to Madame Violette, and announced that they would be leaving as soon as possible, whenever they could book seats in a stagecoach to take them back to the Eastern seaboard.

Violette, who was in her boudoir putting the last touches to her *maquillage* before the evening's business began, glanced up from her dressing table, and said: "Well, my dear, I didn't expect I could keep you here forever. . . . You've both been a pleasure to have as houseguests, and there's not many I could say *that*

ROSEWOOD

about. And you've lent that old pianoforte in the parlor a touch of class, which God knows it needed."

"We can never repay you for your generosity to us, but you know that we both feel very, very deeply—"

Violette continued to powder her face, staring into the ornamental mirror, and her eyes met his in the glass.

"Oh, *merde*—you didn't think I did it out of the goodness of my heart, did you?" she asked. "Hell, no. The first time I laid eyes on you, practically as naked as a jaybird, in that little room behind the church, I said to myself, '*That one's for me,*' I said. It ain't often I let my feelings get the better of me, honey, after all these years, and I should know better by now, for it's almost always a mistake."

Gerard felt himself blushing, but he was a little flattered, too, as she continued: "It was a mistake this time, sure enough. For as soon as I realized how much that little girl of yours loves you—and how much you love her—I knew I was wasting my time. You weren't for me at all. You are for her, and always will be, I guess. Still—"

She rose majestically, straightened her corsage, looked at her reflection critically, and concluded: "That's how it goes. You can't win a prize in the lucky bag every time—and if you don't want me, there's plenty more as will."

She turned to face him, head held high, her backbone straight as a poker.

"And I reckon they can think themselves fortunate, don't you? I've worn pretty well, considering. . . . Say, give me one kiss, honey lamb."

She threw her arms about him, and kissed him with such force that a spasm of excitement rocked him on his heels: when she let him go, he was gasping for breath.

"There. Now get back to that piano and go to work, mister, and I wish you all the luck in the world."

NEW WORLD . . .

That was, in the most important sense, the night that Gerard said goodbye to Madame Violette and her establishment, although it was some while before he and Coral were able to scrape together enough money to pay their fares to New York—and even longer before they finally arrived in that city, after a very slow and very tedious journey across country.

They left their few items of luggage in the care of a clerk at the coaching office, and crossed the city on foot, making for the Park Theatre on Park Row—for this was where the Maguire Company had performed during their last visit to New York, and Coral was hoping desperately that by some miracle she might find her uncle there again.

The miracle did not occur. Outside the theatre, playbills announced the imminent arrival of a company from Boston, with a performance of *The School for Scandal*—and Coral felt tears pricking at her eyes.

"To have come all this way—for nothing," she said huskily. "Oh, Gerard—I'm sorry, I was so sure we'd find him. . . . What are we to do?"

"At least we can make inquiries at the stage door," Gerard comforted her. "You never know, Dermot may have been here quite recently. We might get news of him."

They repaired to the back alley behind the theatre and made themselves known to the stage-doorkeeper—a taciturn individual who was not disposed to be friendly.

"Maguire? No, can't say I recall anyone of that name," he muttered, offhandedly, cutting himself a plug of chewing tobacco.

"But you must remember Dermot Maguire's company! We played here last year in *Hamlet*!"

Thinking back to their premiere, which had been something of a disaster, Gerard added dryly: "I can't imagine anyone forgetting *that* in a hurry."

"Oh, yeah—Dermot Maguire. Irish, weren't he? Well, I ain't seen him since, and that's a fact." The

man spat with deadly accuracy, aiming at a brass spittoon near their feet, and Coral and Gerard both stepped back, as he called to a passing stagehand: "Hey, Jake, have you heard tell of a paddy actor by the name of Dermot Maguire?"

The stagehand paused, and grinned: "Sure thing! All the actors in town are talking about him. Ain't you heard the gossip? The old feller's gone up in the world—he's living in one of them mansions on the Broadway!"

Coral stared at him.

"Dermot Maguire—my Uncle Dermot—in a *mansion*?"

They found the address without difficulty, but were almost too overawed by the palatial entrance to ring the bell: they both felt sure there must be some mistake. A butler answered their summons, and upon hearing the name Maguire he ushered them in and asked them deferentially to wait.

Glancing around the grand reception room, with its long mirrors and fine paintings, they asked one another in bewilderment if they were dreaming. The idea of the old actor-manager, with his shabby grandeur and his perpetually empty pockets, living in these luxurious surroundings was hard to credit.

Then the door opened, and Dermot himself came in.

He looked older, and grayer, and he seemed a little shortsighted. There was a pair of spectacles upon his stubby nose, which he had never worn before, and he seemed to have put on a little weight. His clothes were a great deal finer than the threadbare garments he used to possess, and his long, theatrical locks had been trimly barbered. But the booming voice was unmistakable.

"I understand you wish to see me, Mr. and Mrs. Mallory? I can't say that the name is familiar to me, but—"

He peered at them over his spectacles, and his face

changed, as Coral exclaimed: "Uncle darling—don't you know us? It's me and Gerard—"

"Coral? Holy mother—is it yourself? And Gerard Kean, as I live and breathe. Sure, I thought the two of you were dead and gone. Heaven be praised, you're still alive!" He hugged them both, declaiming, "'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by'—by your safe return!"

"But what are you doing here, Uncle? In this grand house?" Coral's words tumbled out, somewhere between laughter and tears.

"And where's the rest of the company? Are they all with you?" Gerard chimed in. They were all speaking at once, and it was hard to disentangle what the old man was saying. "Where's Mrs. Mountford? And Walter Wilkins—?"

"No, no, they're gone, all gone, long since—home to Ireland—"

"And you've been left here all alone?" Coral asked.

"Oh, no, my dear. Not quite alone. No, indeed!" Old Dermot chuckled and indicated the door, which was swinging open again behind them.

The newcomer was a slim, beautiful young woman, with raven-black hair and a creamy complexion. As she entered the room, the visitors turned to face her—and so the two Maguire sisters met one another again.

"Rosalie!" cried Coral, joyfully.

Rosalie gasped, looking from one to the other; then the color drained from her face, as she gasped:

"Coral, Gerard—oh, God . . ."

And she fell to the polished floor, in a dead faint.

Chapter Four

A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER

"It must be the weather . . ." she whispered.

As they rushed to pick her up, Rosalie began to come to. Her eyelids fluttered, and the color slowly returned to her cheeks.

"It's all right," she continued, trying to smile. "How stupid—I don't know what came over me. It must be this sudden change in the weather."

Certainly the weather had taken a complete turn; the cooler days and fresh breezes that had swept Coral and Gerard along on the last hundred miles of their journey had now given way to a heat wave. New York was baking in an oven-like temperature, the air close and oppressive.

"My dear child," Dermot fussed over Rosalie anxiously, like an old mother hen. "Do you think you should see a doctor? Shall I call your husband? I'm sure Paul would send for the very best medical advice."

"No . . . don't do that. It's nothing in the least serious," Rosalie insisted, and took a deep breath. "I'll go and find Paul myself in a moment, and tell him the good news. How amazing to see you both again—my darlings—my own dear family."

She threw her arms around her sister, and embraced Coral fondly, then—with a slight hesitation—gave a kiss to Gerard as well.

"Dear brother-in-law, you're both looking a little tired. Where have you been? How do you suddenly appear so magically, without any warning?"

"It's a long story," Gerard began, but Coral interrupted him: "And it will keep till later. We're every bit as surprised to see *you*, my love, for we left you in Ireland, and never even knew you were thinking of traveling to America at all."

"We didn't know it ourselves at that time," said Rosalie, patting her hair back into place and trying to regain her composure. "But now Paul has been sent over upon a diplomatic mission, for talks with the United States government."

Paul La Roche, a Frenchman and an ardent royalist who had played his part in the overthrow of Napoleon and the Republic, had now been restored to a position of power and authority in his own country. Rosalie's face had darkened as she spoke, and a passing shadow seemed to cross her thoughts. With an effort she rallied, saying brightly:

"But we must not waste time in chattering. Paul is upstairs in the study. He will be so delighted to see you both—and so will Blaise. . . ."

"Blaise is here too?" Coral exclaimed joyfully. "Oh, I'm so glad!"

"Surely you wouldn't expect a doting mama to leave her son and heir alone in Ireland, would you?" asked Gerard. "Let's see—how old is our young nephew now? He must be—what? Two years old? Three?"

"Three and a half," Rosalie corrected him, and there it was again, that fleeting shadow in her eyes. "Wait here, I'll go and find them both."

She slipped out of the room quickly, and old Dermot took charge of the situation once more.

"Well, now, we must see about finding a room for you both. You'll be staying here with us, of course? Indeed, I shan't take no for an answer."

"It's very kind of you, Uncle, but—I suppose Paul has rented this house as his temporary accommodation?" Coral asked, looking round the elegant reception room.

"Not at all, not at all!" The old man chuckled and

ROSEWOOD

winked one eye wickedly. "Paul and Rosalie are staying here as my guests, just like yourselves. This is *my* new abode. What d'ye think of it?"

They stared at him incredulously. "You mean—this is *your* house? But—but how? Why?" Gerard asked. "You can't have made so much money out of your theatrical touring, surely."

"Ssh! Theatricals are a thing of the past, laddie. Though I must confess, if it hadn't been for my blessed talent as an actor, I might not be here this day."

Coral and Gerard exchanged glances, completely bewildered.

"After our season in Washington terminated so uncomfortably last year, I tried to struggle on for a while, though the company was sadly depleted. You'd gone off in search of your wandering boy, my dearest child, and I'd no way of knowing if I'd ever see either of you again—but I tried to keep going, nonetheless. I returned to New York and revived *King Lear* and *The Dream*. And it was while we were playing our final week that *she* came into my dressing room—and into my life."

"She?"

Dermot indicated an oil painting above the fireplace, the portrait of a buxom matron with a winning, childlike smile.

"Martha Carrington as was—Martha Carrington Maquire as is. My lady wife."

"You're *married*, Uncle?" Coral exclaimed with wonder.

"And why not, pray? D'ye suppose I'm too old to learn new tricks at my time of life? They do say that some of the sweetest tunes are played upon an old fiddle. And the darling creature is quite devoted to me, I need hardly say. It all began when she came to see my *Lear*. . . . She returned the next night, and the next—but it was when she saw my Bottom that she finally made up her mind."

"I beg your pardon?" Gerard began, but Coral nudged him, whispering, "Bottom the Weaver—in *The Dream*."

"She called in to pay her respects, and we fell into a long conversation that seemed to go on all night and for several days following. And we have been talking ever since—as man and wife. She was a widow, the daughter of a wealthy family, pushed into an arranged marriage when she was little more than a child. Cleaver Carrington was a millionaire in his own right, and so when he finally departed this life, my dear Martha was left in circumstances that were—shall we say—comfortable?"

Coral glanced around the ornate, elaborate furnishings of the salon, and felt inclined to agree.

"Martha's out at the moment, but she'll join us for luncheon. She will be delighted to meet you both, for she's often heard me speak of you."

But at this point the door reopened and Rosalie returned; in her arms she carried her baby son, young Blaise, his round face shining with excitement and his shock of golden hair flopping over his bright blue eyes. He saw Coral, and held out his chubby arms, crowing:

"Auntie, Auntie Coral—"

Coral flew to him and took him from his mother, kissing him again and again.

"Am I not entitled to a greeting also?" inquired a smooth baritone voice with the merest hint of a French accent.

Paul La Roche had become the very model of an international diplomat. As perfectly groomed and tailored as ever, he stood with one hand resting upon the door, darkly saturnine—the complete man of the world, making himself at home in whatever country he might find himself.

"Paul. Of course—it's wonderful to see you again." Coral put up her cheek to be kissed, still holding her baby nephew close to her heart.

"And it is a great joy for me, I assure you." Paul composed his features in a polite smile, and crossed to shake hands with Gerard. "You too, Gerard—that goes without saying, my dear chap."

Gerard noticed that in the past year, Paul seemed to have become even more sophisticated, throwing off the occasional English colloquialism, which sounded faintly strange upon his lips.

Perhaps that was what gave his speech a slight air of insincerity. Gerard felt sure that he was pleased to see them, and yet—there was something in his manner that did not altogether ring true.

Then a butler entered to announce that luncheon awaited them, and they all repaired to the beautifully appointed dining room. A few minutes later, the door flew open to admit their hostess.

Martha Carrington Maguire was every bit as delightful as her portrait, though perhaps a little more amply proportioned; but her obvious good nature and vivacity were irresistible, and she kept up a nonstop flow of amiable chatter from the moment that the introductions were effected.

"Well, I declare. So you're Coral—and this is your husband. My, what a handsome young man—and what a fortunate creature I am to have three such good-looking gentlemen in the house all together; for Monsieur La Roche is so suave and sophisticated, I'm just wild about that distingué air of his. And of course there's no one in the whole wide world can hold a candle to my Mr. Maguire when it comes to manly beauty—but you really mustn't let me run on so, for I'm simply longing to hear what's been happening. . . . Where have you been? What have you been up to? Begin at the beginning and don't you dare leave out one single solitary detail!"

So in the course of the luncheon party, the two sides of the family exchanged all their news, and when all the mutual congratulations were out of the way, Paul inquired about the Mallorys' future plans.

"Oh, we'll sail home again as soon as we can," Coral answered, then added eagerly: "Who knows? If you finish your official business here in time, Paul, we might all be able to sail back to Europe together!"

There was a little clatter; Rosalie had overturned the salt cellar.

"I'm sorry—I'm being very clumsy," she began.

"Dear child, throw a pinch over your left shoulder this minute," Dermot advised her.

"Do, my dear, for pity's sake, I beg of you!" Martha added her own entreaty. "I know it's ridiculous to take these things seriously, but I do honestly believe that everything has a hidden meaning, don't you? I'll never forget the day I married Mr. Carrington, he was so dreadfully late for the ceremony, I began to get quite anxious, and he told me afterwards that as he was getting dressed that morning, his shaving mirror had fallen down and smashed into a thousand pieces. Well, you know what a terrible omen *that is*."

"And did he have seven years' bad luck?" Gerard inquired politely.

"That I couldn't say, for he died only three years later, but he did cut his hand quite severely and had to walk up the aisle covered in sticking plaster, which was bad enough."

Rosalie muttered that she didn't believe in superstition, but Coral noticed that she threw a pinch of salt over her shoulder, all the same.

"It must be the heat that's making me nervous. It's so oppressive, I can hardly breathe," Rosalie added, to excuse herself. "Why don't we all go out for a little fresh air?"

The long windows stood open, but it was true; there wasn't enough of a breeze to stir the curtains. Coral seconded the proposal, and Martha fell in with the plan; she would give orders for an open carriage to be brought around so they could all go for a drive together, when lunch was over.

The expedition was not an unqualified success.

ROSEWOOD

Rosalie concentrated upon Blaise sitting upon her lap, and hardly spoke at all, while Martha—as if by way of compensation—scarcely paused for breath as she commented upon the various places they passed on the drive.

“There’s the Park Theatre. Oh, but of course you know that already, for Mr. Maguire told me that’s where you performed when you first came to New York. . . . And soon you’ll see the other theatre—the Chatham Garden; they tell me the building holds two thousand people, isn’t that just amazing? Though the only time I was ever there, they played a most horrid murder and I had to come out because I do so detest the sight of blood, even though I knew perfectly well it was only cochineal, so *that* night it only held one thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine. . . . Oh, and there’s the Bowling Green. Such a very gentlemanly diversion, I always think.”

She indicated the open space as they passed it. Several players were already there, dressed in white shirts and pantaloons and intent upon their game, followed by a little knot of admiring ladies.

“Would you like to get out and take a turn around the Green, to watch them at play?” Uncle Dermot asked.

“No, I don’t think so. Let’s go on to the park at Battery Point. Blaise likes the Battery, don’t you, my precious? We’ll find you some ice cream if you’re a good boy—and you shall watch the boats going in and out of the harbor. It’ll be cooler down by the water. . . .”

So Dermot instructed the coachman, and they made their way to the Battery, a pleasure garden not unlike the one at Vauxhall in London or (as Coral recalled with a shiver) the Tivoli in Paris.

By night, it was obviously a very popular center of recreation, with musicians, jugglers, fireworks and every kind of diversion. By day, it was more sedate, a trim stretch of parkland overlooking the river, at the

very tip of the island of Manhattan, where families might take a stroll together, on a fine, warm afternoon.

As they set off on a tour of the gardens, Paul suggested to Rosalie: "Why don't we let the boy amuse himself with his new aunt and uncle, while you and I take a turn through the shrubbery? For we have various business matters to discuss which would surely bore everyone else."

Rosalie looked at her husband uncertainly, but only replied: "Very well, Paul, if that is what you want."

So the little party split up; and Dermot, Martha and Blaise remained with the Mallorys. They bought some fruit and ice cream for the child, and he occupied himself with this unexpected feast, while they sat in a leafy bower and talked. Or to be strictly accurate, Martha Carrington Maguire talked, fanning herself vigorously all the while with a little mother-of-pearl fan.

"In my young days, I used to be a great theatregoer, I confess, but nowadays the standard of taste is so low that no respectable people would dream of being seen at the playhouse. Do you know, there are actually some—some—I can hardly bring myself to say the words in front of the child. Some *l,o,o,s,e, w,o,m,e,n*—" she spelt the words out carefully. "I hear they make a habit of booking the stage boxes, so they can flaunt themselves and be seen in their vulgar finery—half-naked, some of them, by all accounts, with their *b,o,s,o,m,s* bulging out of their dresses, to be ogled by all the young men. No wonder decent folk stay away. Let me tell you, I was mighty relieved when Mr. Maguire gave up his career—though of course it was a sad loss to the theatrical profession."

"Do you never hanker to go back to the footlights, sir?" Gerard asked.

"Not I. I'm very well content as I am," said Dermot. "After all those years of spouting endless yards of blank verse—'Words, words, words,' as Hamlet rightly describes them—it's something of a luxury for me to be able to sit back and *listen*, for a change!"

ROSEWOOD

Coral thought she detected a twinkle in his eye as he said this, but Martha sailed on, unconcernedly.

"Rosalie, now—she's of the same opinion, I fancy, for I heard her say recently that she never intends to put greasepaint on her face again. Well, it must be so bad for the complexion apart from anything else. And I'm sure Mr. La Roche would not be happy to have his wife performing in public; after all, it would be a little undignified for a man in his position. So on that point they are certainly of a mind—why, there they are now."

She broke off and waved gaily, screwing up her eyes as she peered into the distance.

The others turned and saw Paul and Rosalie some way off, emerging from an alley in the ornamental shrubbery. Even from this distance, it was apparent that they were having a violent argument. They were too far off to hear the words, but Paul was gesticulating angrily and Rosalie was pleading with him, in tears.

Even little Blaise noticed something was amiss, and began to ask questions. What were Mama and Papa doing?

Suddenly Rosalie turned and ran away from her husband, fleeing down a long avenue of shady trees, toward the water's edge.

"It's nothing," Coral assured the boy quickly. "They're playing a game, that's all."

Paul turned on his heel and came toward them, his face a mask that betrayed no expression whatever.

"Where's Mama gone?" Blaise wanted to know.

Paul stared at him coldly for a moment, then said:

"Your mother has gone to look at the river. She finds it is more pleasant by the water's edge."

Martha tapped Gerard's arm lightly with her fan.

"Mr. Mallory, I think perhaps we should be getting back to the house now. It will soon be time for tea. I adopt your British customs, you see, out of deference to Mr. Maguire, and I really do think we should try to forget all about that silly business in Boston Harbor,

NEW WORLD . . .

don't you, and let bygones be bygones—so would you be kind enough to go and fetch Rosalie for me, and tell her we are about to leave?"

Gerard did as she suggested, and made his way to the little promenade that encircled the park, running out to the Battery Point. There he found Rosalie alone, standing where the ripples almost lapped over her shoes, staring off into the distance at the sails of the ships motionless on the still water.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She did not reply directly, but said at last: "The water looks so beautiful. So cool, so peaceful . . ."

It was as if she were almost hypnotized, and as Gerard stood beside her, gazing out at the million points of light that danced upon the surface in an ever-changing kaleidoscope, he felt that he too was being drawn within some spell.

"Rosalie," he tried again. "What is wrong?"

She looked at him then—a long, questioning look; and he saw a great depth of anguish in her eyes, deeper by far than the river that surrounded them.

"It's fascinating, isn't it?" she asked. "The water makes me feel I could—I could—"

She shook her head, unable to complete the thought.

"What? Tell me."

"No. We must go back. Paul will be waiting."

That night, New York seemed hotter than ever, as the sun went down and darkness fell like a thick blanket, suffocating the city.

In their luxurious guest room at the Broadway mansion, Coral and Gerard lay naked upon their bed, not even touching. It was too hot to sleep; it was too hot to make love.

"I'm sure Rosalie was right. It's the weather that has upset her," Coral said at last. For Gerard had told her of his strange encounter with Rosalie at the water's edge. "I feel the same way myself—I can scarcely breathe."

ROSEWOOD

The windows were open wide, leading on to a little balcony, and now Gerard got up, restlessly pacing the room. He moved toward the night sky as if seeking to find some relief out there.

"Gerard, darling, suppose someone should see you—" Coral began.

"It's one o'clock in the morning. This Broadway is like a deserted village," he said. "There's no one about. Come and see."

She needed little persuasion, and a moment later they stood side by side on the balcony, like two pale statues in the darkness, enjoying the slightest suspicion of cool air upon their bodies.

And then they both tensed, hearing the murmur of angry voices.

"I am not a fool. I am not blind. I can trust the evidence of my own eyes . . ."

"Please, Paul, listen to me—be patient—"

"I have listened too long to your lies and excuses! I cannot endure any more!"

The master bedroom, too, had a balcony, only a stone's throw away; and the windows there had also been flung wide. Through the still night air, the sound of the marital quarrel carried clearly.

"Why can't you be reasonable? I love you, you know that—" Rosalie was saying, and her voice was thick with tears.

"And I love you too. But as for *him* . . . I can never accept that. You must choose between us. It is him or me—we cannot continue like this."

Coral whispered in Gerard's ear: "We should not be listening—"

She tried to move away, but something made Gerard clasp her wrist. They stood where they were a moment longer.

"No, Paul, don't ask me to do that—I can't give him up—"

"Then you may say goodbye to me, for I will never see you again!"

NEW WORLD . . .

There was a storm of weeping, and they could imagine Rosalie trying to hold her husband in her arms. Then the sound of a scuffle as he thrust her aside. Seconds later a door slammed. It was over, and Paul had left her alone.

"What does it mean?" Coral asked under her breath, appalled by the pitiful keening of Rosalie, as she sobbed her heart out. "Who are they talking about? Who is the other man?"

Gerard did not reply; he released his hold upon her, and Coral found that her skin was damp with sweat.

The following morning at breakfast, Rosalie looked very pale, and there were heavy circles beneath her eyes, but she tried to keep up appearances, a fixed smile upon her lips.

"Why, where's Paul?" Dermot asked, in surprise. "Isn't he joining us for bacon and eggs today?"

"Paul has had to leave—very early," Rosalie answered carefully. "He was called away for an emergency meeting in the small hours of the morning. There is some government crisis; he has been summoned to Washington."

"And he didn't take you with him? Why, for shame—I declare if I were in your shoes, I'd never let such a good-looking gentleman out of my sight!" Martha teased her gaily. "It's as much as I dare to let Mr. Maguire cross the street on his own. I'm always in mortal terror that some scheming hussy will come and lure him away from me."

"No fear of that, my love," beamed Dermot, not a little flattered by the notion of being such a desirable object. "For I only have had eyes for you from the first moment we met." His voice took on a melodious richness as he quoted: "'No sooner met—but we looked . . . No sooner looked—but we loved . . . No sooner loved—but we sighed. . . .'"

"Mr. Maguire, I do declare you'll make me blush. Doesn't he just say the sweetest things? Now you've

ROSEWOOD

made me forget what I was talking about. Oh, no, I recall it now—Mr. La Roche off to Washington—what a cruel husband! How can the monster run away and desert his wife so?”

Rosalie stood up, pushing back her chair.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have rather a bad headache. I’m sorry. I think perhaps I should go upstairs and lie down.”

They watched her as she hurried from the room, and Martha turned to Coral with concern.

“Poor girl, do you suppose she’s sickening for something? Perhaps we should persuade her to see a doctor. She doesn’t look at all well. . . . Coral, why don’t you go after her and see if there is anything she needs?”

“Presently, perhaps—but not just at the moment,” said Coral. “I believe it would be kinder to leave her to herself for a while.”

Privately, she decided that later in the day she would try to talk to Rosalie alone and find out what was going on; but it was a matter of choosing the right moment.

“Perhaps she didn’t sleep very well last night,” added Gerard. “I don’t suppose any of us did. It was stiflingly hot. When she’s had some rest, she may feel a little better.”

So they left Rosalie to her own devices for a while, and the day wore on. She did not put in an appearance at lunchtime, and later one of the maids approached Coral and Gerard as they were about to set off on an afternoon stroll, inquiring whether they would be taking Master Blaise with them for his daily airing in the park?

Coral said: “We should be happy to take him, but perhaps you should speak to his mother about it first. Will you go up to her room and ask for her permission?”

“I tried that, ma’am,” the girl replied. “But Mrs.

NEW WORLD . . .

La Roche is not at home. She's gone out, some while ago. . . . I don't know where she is."

They looked at one another.

"Didn't she say where she was going?"

"She never said a word to nobody, ma'am. . . . She never even left a note. And now little Blaise is crying for his Mama."

"I'll go to him," said Coral quickly. "Gerard, why don't you try to find Rosalie? I don't suppose she's gone far. . . ."

But in this supposition, Coral was wrong.

Gerard searched for some time without success. The sun was beginning to go down when he reached Battery Park. He remembered how she had looked at the water, as if hypnotized by it, and he remembered the way she had spoken of it with longing.

There was no sign of her upon the little promenade or anywhere within the park. He made up his mind to follow the path that led back along the riverside, exploring every corner, keeping his eyes open for any sign of his sister-in-law.

Had he but known it, he was on the right track. Not so far away, the harbor twisted into a labyrinth of docks, where tall ships rode at anchor or were moored up alongside the wharves.

And it was here, drifting hopelessly along a shadowy jetty, that Rosalie walked alone like a ghost, staring at the shifting patterns of the water below, listening as it lapped against the stones and wooden piers, praying for release from her torment.

The sun disappeared behind a tangle of masts, sliding down below the skyline of silhouetted warehouses and derelict shanties, and the light began fading fast.

Soon, she prayed, it would be night. Soon the blackness would creep up and engulf the city, as she herself would be engulfed, if she took one more pace toward the edge of the jetty, and then . . .

ROSEWOOD

A memory from her Catholic childhood rose up and gave her pause; to take one's own life would be a mortal sin. Yes, but what was that to her, who had committed so many mortal sins already? And yet—was this not the worst sin of all—the final ingratitude and despair?

But it would be peace, also. Deep, deep peace, closing over her like a benediction, with no more fear, no more heartbreak, no more sleepless nights . . .

She wandered on aimlessly, her eyes fixed on the rippling water, and did not notice that she was no longer alone.

The first thing she knew was when a rough voice spoke out of the shadows behind a ten-foot stack of timber.

“Where ya going, lady?”

She stopped then, and looked round, frowning slightly. “I beg your pardon?”

There were two men there, lounging on some bales of straw. One was quite young, with dirty, unkempt fair hair and a straggling beard. The other was older, and as she watched he stood upright, stretching himself like an animal. His body was thickset and powerful, like a grizzly bear, and he had obviously been in many a fight, for one of his eyes was half-closed, and his nose was broken.

She knew at a glance that these men were derelicts, hoboes, tramps—the outcasts of society. And she knew in the same instant that they regarded her as their prey.

It was the older man who had addressed her. “I said ‘where ya going, lady?’ ” he repeated, moving purposefully toward her.

Both men were dressed in rags, or half-dressed, for the heat of the day had encouraged them to throw off some of their tattered garments. Stripped to the waist, their powerful torsos glistened with sweat in the dying light.

NEW WORLD . . .

"That's none of your business," she replied, as she turned aside.

The man moved with surprising swiftness for one of his bulk, and a hairy forearm shot out, barring her way.

"Not so fast," he said, then hawked up a gobbet of phlegm, and spat it near her feet. "You ain't going no place."

"Let me pass, please," she said, with a chill of fear.

The man chuckled, an unpleasant, animal-like growl—and he stank like an animal too. She smelled the rank odor of a beast that has been caged up in its own filth, and her gorge rose.

"Let me go!" she repeated.

"That ain't very friendly," said the hobo, and he grasped her by the shoulder, pulling her roughly toward him. "Let's have a look at ya."

She found herself facing the man. He towered above her, and she could see the little rivulets of sweat trickling down his broad, shaggy chest, gleaming among the matted hair.

"What's a fine lady like you doin', strollin' on your own in a hellhole like this?" he asked.

She did not reply, but prayed silently for deliverance.

"Cat got your tongue?" he jeered, and grasped her chin in his massive, filthy paw. "C'mon, lady, let's hear ya talk fancy. You be good to us, and we'll be good to you—huh?"

His fingers were upon her mouth, and she reacted instinctively, biting his coarse, fleshy thumb. Cursing, he let go of her, then hit her across the face with the back of his hand.

"Goddam ya, ya little bitch!" He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "Don't you try playin' games with me, d'ya hear? I can see we're going to have to teach you a lesson."

But the younger man looked uneasy, scratching his

ROSEWOOD

head and mumbling: "Hey, Zack. Maybe you'd better let her go—"

"We'll let her go all right, after we've done with her!" snarled the other.

Then he put his hands upon the fastening of her dress, and tugged at the buttons and laces. She was powerless to stop him; and a curious inertia crept over her. She was like a doll in his hands, a doll he was clumsily trying to undress. Her gown fell from her shoulders, and her bosom was exposed. Zack grunted with satisfaction at the sight of her naked breasts.

"Purty," he said. "Now get ya clothes off, lady—before I tear 'em to pieces."

And he flung her down on to the straw at his feet. At the same moment, he began to untie the rope that was knotted about his waist, and the ragged breeches he wore flapped open, sliding down around his huge thighs. He was in a state of violent sexual aggression, and she saw that his male member was thick and heavy, with knotted veins standing out along its length.

"*Get undressed, I said!*" he shouted, in a sudden fit of rage, and lashed out with one foot, aiming a kick at her body.

She did not even flinch. What did it matter if he kicked her or beat her? What if he raped her—if they both raped her? Nothing mattered now. She was so near death, these final moments of degradation made no real difference. In a strange, almost dreamlike state, she lay upon the straw and waited for the next blow to fall.

But it never came.

Somewhere above her head, she heard a voice, the voice of the younger man, saying: "You lay off her, Zack—I'm telling you—"

Then she was aware of a hand on Zack's arm, spinning him around, and a roar of fury as Zack threw himself upon his adversary.

NEW WORLD . . .

"I'll kill ya, ya little skunk. I'll slaughter ya—"

And the sound of a savage blow, and then another. She heard someone slip and fall, and a moment later the two men were rolling together upon the straw, panting and swearing. For a few seconds, Rosalie was forgotten.

Slowly, she dragged herself to her feet, and began to walk away. She knew she could not get far, but that did not matter; there was not far to go. Only a very few more steps, and then—

She reached the edge of the wharf, and took one last look at the black oily water swirling below her, then moved forward.

As Gerard arrived, he was vaguely aware of the two men on the ground, locked in a punishing combat; but his only concern was for Rosalie, her hair hanging loose, her fine breasts uncovered, as she stepped deliberately from the edge of the pier, hung for a moment in space, then disappeared into the water below with a terrifying splash.

"Rosalie!"

The name burst from his lips, but it was too late. He began to run, tearing off his jacket and flinging it aside, shouting at the two men: "Don't you see there's a woman drowning?"

At the sound of the splash, and his angry words, the fighters broke apart and stumbled to their feet, staring at Gerard.

"Trouble," said Zack, uneasily. "They'll have the law on us. . . . C'mon, let's beat it."

He took to his heels and disappeared into the shadows.

But the younger man remained, frowning at the newcomer who was by now poised to dive into the harbor. Slowly—reluctantly almost, and yet moved by some spirit he could not himself identify—the young hobo began to strip off his own tattered garments.

Gerard had never been a strong swimmer, and the

ROSEWOOD

shock of the icy water, after the heat of the sultry night, struck him like a body blow. He gasped, and swallowed a mouthful of water as he rose to the surface, sputtering. There was no sign of Rosalie; he took a deep gulp of air and dived down once more, opening his eyes underwater, trying desperately to locate her. Surely she had jumped in somewhere very near to this?

He swam on, feeling his lungs aching and his ears beginning to sing—and suddenly there she was, only a few yards away, her arms and legs flung out uselessly, rolling over in the eddying water like a mass of seaweed, as if she were almost weightless.

Her hair was like a film of soft dark lace, and her face was greenish-white; her eyes were closed.

He saw all this as he put his hands beneath her armpits and tried to lift her—only to discover that she was not weightless after all. Instinctively, her limbs grappled with his, and she appeared to be trying to drag him down.

He had to raise her—he knew that—but his lungs were almost bursting by now; if he let her go, and returned to the surface as he longed to do, he was afraid he might not find her a second time. And as he thought this, an even more terrifying possibility occurred to him. *Could* he let her go, even if he wished to? Her hands were about his neck in a stranglehold, and she clung to him like—the words danced ironically through his brain—“like grim death” . . .

At that moment, when they could both so easily have perished, Gerard became aware that he was no longer alone with Rosalie. The gleaming, nude body of a man appeared from nowhere, and he felt a surge of relief as the stranger prised Rosalie's hands from his throat.

Immediately buoyant, Gerard began to soar upward through the water, but he kept a firm hold on Rosalie's arms. The other man had a grip upon her

waist, and between them they managed to drag her unconscious form to safety.

Munutes later, they lay upon the jetty, Gerard recovering his breath in great, shuddering gasps—the pressure of the water had left his chest feeling as though he had been suffocated—and the naked man straddling Rosalie's hips, as she lay face down on the gray stones of the wharfside.

Methodically, with broad, capable hands and muscular forearms, the unknown rescuer kneaded Rosalie's ribcage, trying to force air into her lungs and expel the water she had swallowed.

Unknown, yes—but was he?

Gerard looked—and looked again, seeing the slim flanks and the broad, brown torso with its scrub of fair hair, now shining darkly with water. And a faint, long-lost memory stirred, the memory of a day when Gerard was only a stripling, at home in the grounds of Rosewood, far away in England. The day when one of the stable lads offered to teach him how to swim.

As if reading his thoughts, the other man looked across at him now, and sketched a brief smile.

"She'm breathing. . . . She do be comin' to herself again."

"Jem—Jem Bolt!"

"Aye, Master Gerard. T'ain't the first time as we did swim together, I'm thinkin'."

And now Jem Bolt—a blonde, bearded young rufian in his mid-twenties—rose to his full height, totally untroubled by his own nakedness.

"You'd best tend to her, Master Gerard. She'll be all right now."

Gerard stared at him for a moment longer, seeing a double image—the clumsy, colt-like youth who had plunged into the fishpond with him that summer day (and astonishingly, shockingly, Gerard's sister Garnet had been there too!)—and the full-grown man who stood before him, with adult strength and virility.

ROSEWOOD

"Yes," Gerard said, recovering his breath at last. "I'll look to Rosalie; while you get some clothes on."

He knelt beside Rosalie and lifted her lovely head as she opened her eyes. At first she could not remember where she was, or how she came there. Then her mind began to function, and she turned her head aside, weeping with remorse and shame. And the agony of frustration.

"How did you find me?" she said, when she could speak.

"I was searching for you all along the river," Gerard replied gently. "I saw you fall into the water."

"I did not fall," she corrected him, almost in a whisper. Then her face changed, as she saw they were not alone. "Who's *that*?"

"This is Jem Bolt, who came to your rescue in the nick of time. By myself, I might never have saved you. . . . Jem is an old friend of mine, from England," Gerard explained.

Jem was fully dressed by now—or as fully dressed as he could be, in the rags which were all he had to wear. He gave an apologetic nod of the head, wondering what Rosalie might say to him.

"I know your face. You were there, weren't you? You were with the other one . . ." She broke off, looking from Jem to Gerard, and back again.

Jem stood silent, waiting for the accusation that must surely follow.

"I believe you tried to stop him. Thank you for that, at least. . . . It's all confused in my mind—I can't remember clearly," she said at last.

"What do you mean?" Gerard asked, and for the first time, he began to perceive the true significance of her undress and the way she instinctively crossed her hands over her breasts. "Did that damned blackguard try to—"

She shook her head slightly. "It doesn't matter. It's over now. Nothing matters any more," she said. "Nothing except Blaise. Where is he?"

NEW WORLD . . .

"At home. Coral is taking good care of him."

"I'm sure she is. . . . But I must go to him. Take me home, Gerard."

Between them, the two men supported Rosalie and walked with her until they could hail a passing cab. Then they made their way back to Broadway. Gerard paid off the driver and bade Jem goodnight, telling him to remember the address, for he wished to see him there the following morning.

"You want I should come back tomorrow?" Jem looked up at the imposing mansion doubtfully, as if suspecting some kind of trap. "What for?"

"We have a great deal to talk about, you and I. For one thing, you were instrumental in saving this good lady's life. There will be a reward in it for you—I'll see to that."

Jem's eyes widened. A reward? He'd heard of such things, but he had never expected to receive one, never in all his born days.

"Well, Master Gerard, if you do say so. I'll be here, sure enough."

Inside the house, Coral was waiting anxiously for their return, but she exclaimed with dismay when she saw the condition they were in.

"What on earth has happened?" she began.

"Tell her whatever you wish," Rosalie said to Gerard wearily. "I'm going to Blaise. Is he asleep?"

"Asleep at last. I sang to him and told him stories, and promised you would be back to kiss him good night."

"You may thank Gerard—and another man. But for them I might never have kept your promise."

And with that Rosalie took herself off to the child's room.

"I don't understand. What other man? Where have you been—why are you both soaking wet? Has there been some terrible accident?"

Gerard poured himself a glass of brandy, and replied:

"There was no accident. Rosalie went walking alone down by the river, and was set upon by a dangerous villain. She managed to escape from his assault, but the shock must have unsettled her reason—for I saw her deliberately throw herself into the water. She tried to drown herself."

"Mother of God!" whispered Coral, crossing herself automatically. "I can't believe it—not Rosalie, of all people—she would never do such a thing!"

"I suspect she had reached the point of desperation where she could find no other escape," said Gerard.

"It doesn't make sense. . . . It's like a nightmare." Coral paced the room, clasping her hands. "Oh, we know she had quarreled with Paul—and he has gone off and left her—but that in itself cannot be sufficient reason. Do you suppose there really is another man? A secret lover we know nothing about?"

Gerard shrugged, but said nothing.

He was remembering a certain afternoon, several years earlier, when he and Rosalie had gone out on the river in a little rowing boat, while they were all on tour together, in Ireland. It was quite soon after he had met and fallen head over heels in love with Coral; but at that time she thought him proud and conceited and, far worse, English and Protestant to boot—so she would have none of him.

In his loneliness and despair, he had poured out his troubles to the beautiful, sympathetic Rosalie, and she had comforted him, as only a woman can comfort a man. That was the only time there had ever been anything more than companionable affection between them, but just for a moment Gerard's heart felt leaden, as he wondered uncomfortably if Rosalie might perhaps have read into that incident more than he suspected, if she had indeed gone on nursing a secret passion for him all this while, if she had been misguided enough to confess it to Paul in a reckless moment. . . .

But no! This was arrant nonsense. If he were not so tired, he would never have let himself entertain such idiotic fancies. The incident was over and done with long ago; she had never thought of it again, he felt sure. He knew with certainty that she loved Paul deeply and sincerely, and that she had been unswervingly devoted to him from the moment of their very first meeting.

"No, it's out of the question," he said aloud. "She loves Paul. She's never looked twice at anyone else. I'd take my oath on that."

"Yes. I think you're right—but it's all so mystifying. What can be wrong between them?"

They did not have to wait long for the answer.

The following morning, after breakfast, Gerard and Coral were alone in the drawing room when the door opened, and Rosalie came in, and began to speak without preamble.

"I owe you both an apology—and an explanation—for what happened last night. And even more, for what *could* have happened, so very easily. I tried to put an end to my life. No—don't say anything, Coral. I know what you must be thinking—that I was out of my mind. Perhaps you are right. I had not slept for several nights, I was half-crazy with fatigue and hopelessness. . . . The knowledge of what might have happened has helped me to see things more clearly, I believe. Last night I slept for the first time, and this morning I feel a little calmer at last. So now I can talk to you. Blaise is playing in the nursery, Uncle Dermot and Martha have gone shopping—there is no one to interrupt us. . . . I *must* talk to you."

Gerard began: "Don't tell us anything if you don't wish to. We have no desire to pry into your personal affairs."

"After Blaise—and Paul, of course—you two are the people I love most in the whole world. . . . I can-

ROSEWOOD

not keep my shameful secret from you both. It is right that you should know the truth."

"You do love Paul then? In spite of everything?" Coral asked. "We felt sure you did—and yet . . ."

"Oh, I love him with all my heart; more than I can possibly tell you. If it were not for that, I would never even consider doing what he has asked me to do, not for a single instant. But as it is, he's my man, and if I want to save our marriage—and I do—then I must obey. But it is horribly difficult."

"There's no other man?" Gerard asked hesitantly. "No third person, of whom Paul may be jealous, for some reason?"

"No, of course not! I almost wish there were. Heaven knows it would be a thousand times easier for me to give up another man than to abandon—"

She paused, unwilling to finish the sentence.

"To abandon—whom?" Gerard pressed her for an answer.

"Blaise, of course."

Coral and Gerard stared at her in amazement.

"He seriously expects you to give up your own child? But—*why*?"

Rosalie nodded, her face white, and steeled herself to speak.

"Because he does not accept Blaise as his own. Because he will never accept him. . . . Because Blaise was fathered by another man."

Coral caught her breath: "Rosalie, no—"

"It's true. He was not born prematurely after our marriage, as everyone supposed. He was conceived a few weeks before Paul and I ever met."

There was a long moment of silence, and then Coral said gently: "My dear—I am so very sorry. But—who was the real father? May we know that?"

"He was a sailor. It was a wild romance that flared up and died all too quickly, while he was ashore. I never saw him again."

"The brute!" Coral pressed Rosalie's hand.

"Don't say that. He never knew what the consequence was; and now he will never know, for he's dead and gone. Drowned at sea, they told me."

"But how did Paul find out?"

"I told him. . . . I had to—he had suspected for some while; and finally he had medical evidence that Blaise could not be his own son. You see, we had always wanted another baby, and when heaven did not see fit to bless our marriage, Paul went to several eminent doctors, both in Paris and Dublin. And they somehow discovered the fact that—that Paul cannot—"

"He's not impotent, surely?" Gerard cut in.

"No, not that. But there is something—chemically lacking. He will never be able to father a child. So of course once he realized that, he knew for certain that Blaise could not be his; and I had to confess—as I have now confessed to you."

"But do you mean to tell us that Paul wishes you to give up your child?"

"He will never accept Blaise. It's bad enough that he knows now he can never have an heir. It is doubly painful to have Blaise present as a constant reminder of his own deficiency. That is why he has told me that I have to make a terrible choice—if I wish to continue as Paul's wife, I have to find foster parents for Blaise, and allow him to be adopted."

She buried her head over her clasped hands, averting her face from them.

"Oh, my darling. Will you do such a thing? *Can* you do it?" whispered her sister.

"I must. . . . Oh, it will break my heart, but I have no alternative. I love Paul; I can never leave him—and what kind of life will Blaise have if my marriage is dissolved? For his sake, as much as anyone's, I must find a new home for him while he's still young enough to accept a new family. I will see to it that he

ROSEWOOD

comes to no harm; a childless couple, perhaps, who would love him as if he were their own—”

“Why not give him to us?” Coral asked suddenly. Rosalie’s head jerked up at once.

“You?”

Chapter Five

INTO THE UNKNOWN

Coral nodded eagerly, her thoughts racing. "To me and Gerard—well, why not? We want to have lots of children, don't we, Gerard? Why should Blaise not come to us now, as the eldest boy? After all, he knows us and loves us already. And you could feel confident that he would be well cared for. . . . It's the obvious solution. Oh, dearest Rosalie—do say yes!"

Rosalie looked uncertainly from her to Gerard.

"I don't know, I never thought. . . . What you say is true, of course, but there are other things to be considered. Gerard himself might not be so ready to take on the responsibility."

Coral tucked her arm through her husband's and looked up at him, sunny and serene.

"I knew Gerard well enough to be sure we are in agreement on this. Tell her I'm right, Gerard! You'd be happy to adopt our nephew, wouldn't you?"

"Well—yes, I suppose so." Gerard didn't sound quite so confident, but before he could say anything further, there was a tap upon the door, and they were interrupted by the parlormaid.

"Excuse me, sir, but there's a person below stairs as wishes to speak with you. I said you were busy, but he maintains you sent for him. A Mr. Bolt."

"Ah, yes—Jem Bolt. Bring him up, if you please. I've been expecting him."

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I don't think Mr. Bolt wishes to come up to the drawing room. . . . He's a very rough sort of person, sir, and his clothes ain't

ROSEWOOD

quite—well—fit for company. He asked if you could go downstairs and see him there.”

“Oh. . . . Very well, I’ll come right away. Rosalie, Coral, you must excuse me. I’ll be back shortly.”

When Gerard saw Jem Bolt, he understood the reason for his diffidence. The unexpected ducking in the river had not improved the state of his garments—he wore a tattered shirt that strained across his barrel chest, insecurely fastened by one inadequate button, and his breeches were almost obscenely ragged, with gaping holes here and there that were only partly covered by homemade patches.

He smiled sheepishly at Gerard, who shook him warmly by the hand and led him into the butler’s pantry.

“Come. We shan’t be disturbed here, we can talk in peace. . . . And as for the reward I mentioned to you, I suggest that we should add to it by throwing in a new suit of clothes for good measure! What do you say to that, Jem?”

“Mighty kind of you, Master Gerard. ’Cos I do only have these few items you see me in now, and they won’t last much longer, I reckon!”

“Well, we shall soon put that right.”

Gerard took a couple of tankards and filled them from the butler’s own cask of ale, adding: “I’m sure you’ll not refuse a drink, Jem? Here, get this inside you, and then make yourself comfortable and tell me your story. It was fortunate for me—and for my poor sister-in-law—that you came to our rescue last night, but what in the world are you doing in New York at all?”

Jem took a long pull at his drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Thankee kindly. That feels a whole lot better. . . . Well, Master Gerard, after the last time as I did see you, I decided ’twas time for me and His Majesty’s Navy to part company, like. I left the *Tonnant* and made my way ashore—and there I took to the road.”

NEW WORLD . . .

"So you're a deserter like myself? Well, I think no worse of you for that, Jemmy!" Gerard chuckled, and replenished his tankard. "But what made you run off at that particular time? Garnet and I looked out for you after you'd helped us. We wanted to repay your kindness—"

Jem Bolt shifted uncomfortably in his chair, then grinned with almost childlike simplicity.

"I dunno really. . . . 'Cept I don't like ever to stay too long in one place, doing the same thing. I thought as how it was time for me to move on."

"But where did you go? And where have you been ever since?" Gerard wanted to know.

"Oh—I walked a long way. I can't rightly tell you all the places I been to. But I spent a great while on a farm somewhere, working as a hired hand."

"Oh, yes? And you got tired of that too eventually, I suppose?"

Jem scratched his head.

"Reckon as I did. The farm was run by this widder woman, y'see—Mrs. Lockhart. Her old man had died a few years back, and she hadn't got nobody else to help her—so she done give me a room over the barn, and I did all the heavy work around the place."

"A room over the barn, like you used to have in the stables at Rosewood?"

"Something like that. . . . Only after I'd been there a week or two, she moved me into the house."

Jem looked past Gerard, his eyes unfocused, gazing back into memories of the farm and Mrs. Lockhart. He recalled quite clearly how it had all begun. . . .

He was lying in the sun, out in the fields; that morning they had been cutting hay, and now he was taking a brief respite. Mrs. Lockhart had given him a jug of homemade cider, he remembered, and he was feeling drowsy in the hot sunshine.

He lay half-asleep, thinking of nothing in particular,

ROSEWOOD

enjoying the warmth upon his body, and the feeling of comfortable indolence, until—

A shadow fell across his face, and the voice of the farmer's wife cracked like a whip.

"Disgusting!" she snapped. "Can't you cover yourself up decently, young man? You look like an animal in heat!"

He opened his eyes and looked down to see what she was pointing at.

Somehow, his breeches seemed to be even more tattered than they were before, and he wore no undergarments; his male organ, half-aroused, was clearly visible. As he clutched his rags together in some embarrassment, Mrs. Lockhart continued angrily.

"Don't you ever let me see you like that again, do you understand? Because next time I shall punish you for your lewd, wicked ways."

He didn't know what she meant; but he was soon to find out.

At that time he was still using the hayloft above the barn as his living quarters, and the little straw mattress upon the floor made a hot, uncomfortable bed. Each night he threw aside his single blanket and lay on his back, naked but for his torn breeches: and the midsummer darkness filled his head with steamy, sensual fantasies.

At dawn he awoke to find that Mrs. Lockhart had ascended into the hayloft, and was standing over him like a stern, avenging angel.

"Look at you!" she announced in tones of outrage, prodding him with the toe of her shoe. "More wanton and shameless than ever! I don't pay you to lie abed playing with yourself, young man!"

He looked down—and blushed crimson.

It seemed that during the night the rip in his breeches had become bigger still. He was now fully exposed, his virility rampant, poking out through the hole in the threadbare material.

"Just for that," hissed Mrs. Lockhart spitefully,

"I'm going to stop you a day's wages—to teach you a lesson!"

Hastily dragging the blanket across his loins, he mumbled an apology and pondered unhappily on his situation. He was a lusty young man, and each time he slept he awoke in a state of sexual excitement. If this inquisitive widow continued to spy upon him—and if she continued to withhold his wages each time she found him so aroused—he could foresee that he would never earn any money at all.

But how was it that his breeches seemed to become more and more ragged every time he went to sleep? Could that too have something to do with Mrs. Lockhart?

The following night, he took precautions. For one thing, he made sure that he was chastely rolled up in his blanket, and not uncovered at all. But despite this, when the sun arose and he came to his senses, he found that there was an inquiring hand groping about his person, and he opened his eyes to find the widow on her knees beside him, fumbling under the blanket.

"You won't get ahold of nothin' *this* time, ma'am," he yawned. "'Cos I did put my breeches on back to front afore I went to sleep, and there ain't no holes that side!"

Mrs. Lockhart flushed with anger and mortification and tried to withdraw, but he clutched her wrist tightly.

"You bin a-trying to make a fool out of me, ain't you?" he said. "Now what d'ye want to do a thing like that for? If'n you'd played the game right, I reckon we could *both* have enjoyed ourselves. . . ."

"What? Let go of me, you young devil! I'll have you horsewhipped—I'll have you thrown into jail—I'll have you—I'll have—you . . ."

The last word trailed off on a long breath, and the flustered lady found herself unable to struggle any more. She was helpless in Jem's strong grip, as he forced her down beside him on the straw mattress.

ROSEWOOD

Quickly, he wriggled out of his breeches, and in a matter of moments he was between her knees.

She sobbed and panted, and soon her inarticulate cries turned to sounds of ecstasy, as Jem let loose the full force of his potency, and they clung together in a mutual frenzy.

Before nightfall, Mrs. Lockhart moved Jem out of the barn and into the farmhouse—to share her bed.

At first Jem thought that his fortunes had taken a great turn for the better. While Mrs. Lockhart was not in the bloom of youth, she was a handsome enough woman nevertheless, with fine, generous body and full, greedy lips, and for several weeks Jem enjoyed his newfound role in the household.

He even began to entertain fantasies of a rosy future. For was he not now the man of the house? True, the widow was twice his age, but what did that matter?

One evening, as they lay together upon the double feather-mattress in the pretty bedroom, he broached the subject of marriage.

"Now we seem to be settled down, like—how about you'n me getting wed?" he asked.

She put her hands on either side of his face and held him for a moment, scrutinizing him as if he were an article offered for sale in a shop. And then she laughed.

"Wed? Me and *you*? You think I'd be such a damned fool?" she asked, and she laughed again, loud and long.

Then she wrapped her supple, sinewy legs about his waist, and pulled him close, straining every nerve to hold him tightly, so tightly, that he almost feared that his spine would snap like a twig.

"Get one thing clear, Jem Bolt," she said at last, between her teeth. "I don't *give* myself to any man. . . . I *pay* you to work for me, understand? Just because you're lying atop of me at this minute, that don't make you the master. You do what you're told,

and don't you forget it! I pay the piper—and I call the tune. You're no more fit to take my husband's place than—than my stud horse out in the meadow! Now do what you're paid to do, young man—and do it good!"

Jem found to his dismay that she was speaking no more than the truth; his body may have seemed strong and powerful—his masculinity plunging and withdrawing like the well-oiled piston of some superb machine—but there was no doubt who controlled that machine.

He was a prisoner, to all intents and purposes. If he didn't give satisfaction—whether at work in the fields, in the cowshed, or in the double bed—he would be punished, and he would not be paid.

As time went by, Mrs. Lockhart became ever more demanding: night after night, she snapped her fingers, and Jem tried to obey orders, but each time obedience became more difficult. At last he discovered that he could not even perform efficiently, and had to endure her scathing taunts and insults. He was mentally and physically spent, and one morning—after a wearing and inconclusive night of repeated, half-hearted attempts—he said in a small voice:

"I'm going to have to leave here, Mrs. Lockhart. I just can't take no more of it ma'am. I got to move on."

"And good riddance!" she flung at him. "God knows you'll be no great loss. I can get me a dozen hired hands at the next county fair, any one of 'em better than you. Now get out of my bed, take your clothes, and be off with you!"

He scrambled out from under the sheets, a dejected and drooping figure, and made for the chair where he had folded his garments the previous night.

"*Not those!*" The whiplash tone was back in her voice. "That shirt, them buckskins, that fancy pair of shoes—they belonged to my late husband, God rest him, and they ain't leaving this house. . . . Take your-

ROSEWOOD

self over to the hayloft—you'll find your old shirt and breeches still hanging on a nail behind the door."

And so it was that Jem Bolt left the widow Lockhart's farm no better off than when he first arrived there; indeed, a great deal sadder, and wiser, and far more exhausted.

"So at last you made your way to New York?" Gerard prompted him, after a long silence.

"Yeah . . . I got to New York at last. . . . And I bin looking for work here, ever since," said Jem, disconsolately.

"Then cheer up, my lad, for this is your lucky day. You shall come and work for me!" said Gerard, happily. "Have some more beer, and we'll strike a bargain."

The details were speedily arranged, and then Gerard continued: "The first task is to make you a little more presentable! Come upstairs to the bedroom, and you shall bathe and change, and spruce yourself up."

A few minutes later, he showed Jem into the little dressing room that opened off the guest bedroom he and Coral shared, and supervised his transformation from hobo to gentleman's gentleman.

But, unaccountably, Jem seemed suddenly bashful. Gerard laughed, and rallied him: "Come, Jem, you don't have to be shy with me, surely? Strip off those old clothes, and get yourself washed and shaved."

Jem shifted uncomfortably, and said: "The fact is, Master Gerard, I don't have nothin' else to wear. I only got these togs I do stand up in."

"That's no problem at all—for I have a spare pair of breeches that will suit you well enough, and Mrs. La Roche said she will provide you with some other garments which her husband no longer requires. Between us, we'll soon fit you up—and anything else you need can be bought this afternoon."

Jem beamed happily at the prospect, and swiftly

climbed out of his rags for the last time. Gerard ran his eye over the man's brawny frame, and added: "I only hope Paul's coat and shirt will stretch a little—for you're rather wider across the shoulders, I fancy. . . . Now then, don't let the water get cold. You can borrow my razor, lad, until we find you one of your own."

"Do I have to take my beard off, Master Gerard?"

"I think it might look better. It's the general custom for manservants to be cleanshaven. Well, I'll leave you to your toilet, and see you presently. Don't worry about your clothes. I'll send one of the maids up to bring you your change of costume."

Nothing loath, Jem set to work cheerfully, lathering the brush and applying a creamy foam to his whiskers. He considered his reflection in the long mirror above the marble washstand, and found that he was grinning broadly.

Briskly, he made short work of his blonde beard and regarded himself in the glass with satisfaction, squaring his shoulders. There was no doubt about it; he cut a pretty fine figure as he stood there—like a champion prizefighter, flexing his biceps—and below the waist he could feel the tensing of other muscles too. . . . The sparkle in his eyes became a little more mischievous, as he remembered Gerard's parting words:

"I'll send one of the maids up to bring you your change of costume."

He wondered if it would be the little parlormaid who had met him when he arrived at the servants' entrance; he rather hoped it might be. He had noticed how she had looked him over, and how she had flushed prettily when she saw the torn patches in his trousers, and how she could not help stealing another surreptitious glance to see just how much there was to be seen. . . .

The thought of it quickened Jem's pulse, and the blood mounted in his loins. Soon the girl would come

ROSEWOOD

upstairs with the clean clothes, and he was determined to be ready for her. She was in for a surprise, sure enough!

He left the washbasin and crossed to the hipbath, already filled with steaming hot water. He stepped in and sat down gingerly—anxious not to scald himself—but *ahhh* . . . After the initial shock, the temperature was very pleasant; the soapsuds lapped around his thighs, and as he lathered his private parts, he felt an even greater surge of excitement and anticipation.

At that instant, there was a gentle knock on the door of the outer room.

"May I come in? I've got some things for you. . . ."

("And I've got something for you, and all!" Jem said to himself, under his breath.)

Aloud, he called out: "Come in here, if you please, miss."

He heard footsteps upon the bedroom carpet, and then the dressing-room door opened. It was not the parlormaid at all. It was a far more beautiful girl, with copper-colored curls and lustrous green eyes.

Her eyes were very wide now, as she saw Jem lolling back in the hipbath, his legs spread wide, and his physique flamboyantly displayed.

"For shame, sir!" said Coral, lifting her chin and looking away.

"Don't put on your airs and graces with me, my lass," said Jem. "I know you young serving-girls, trying to make yourselves out so high and mighty, but you're all the same when it comes to a tumble in the hay. Come here, and give us a kiss—"

He stretched out a soapy paw to grab her, but Coral sidestepped neatly.

"You're making several mistakes, sir!" she retorted, and picked up a ewer of cold water that stood nearby. "For in the first place I must tell you that we girls are *not* all the same—and in the second place, I don't find your oafish charms at all tempting—and in the third place I happen to be the wife of your employer,

Mrs. Gerard Mallory! . . . Now perhaps *that* may cool your ardor!"

And with these words she emptied the ewer over Jem's astonished head. He gave a yell of dismay as the icy water coursed down his chest and belly—and his proud manhood dwindled with remarkable speed.

"Missus—madam—I didn't know. I thought—" he sputtered pitifully.

"I know what you thought—that I was a parlor-maid, and an easy conquest. Well, it's time you learned a lesson in good manners, sir. I shall say nothing to my husband of this, for I realize it was a genuine misunderstanding, but if I ever discover you taking such liberties again, there'll be trouble. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Jem, miserably.

Coral only just got out of the bedroom in time, before stuffing her hands over her mouth and dissolving into laughter. When she rejoined Gerard in the drawing room, she was still smiling to herself, and he asked:

"What has happened to amuse you, my dear?"

"Nothing in the least important, I assure you. I left the clothes for your Mr. Bolt, as you asked—and we exchanged a few pleasantries."

"Oh, splendid. . . . He's a rough diamond, but a good lad at heart. I'm sure he will be invaluable to us on the journey. Why, he may even serve as nurse-maid, and take his turn in looking after young Blaise from time to time!"

"You really think we shall need a manservant? It seems to me to be a dreadful extravagance—"

"My darling, Jem will be well satisfied with a small wage, plus his board and lodging. In comparison with the life he has led ever since he left the Royal Navy, service with us will seem like a bed of roses! Besides, he will be eager to return home, I'm sure."

"Home?"

"To Rosewood. Didn't I tell you? Jem used to be a

ROSEWOOD

stable boy there. He and Garnet and I were all pretty much of an age, and as children we were brought up together; he was the housekeeper's son. Then, when he was old enough, he ran away to sea, and joined the Navy—and that's how I met him again. After the retreat from Washington, when I was being held as a spy, he helped save my life that day—and if it were not for Jem, Rosalie would surely be lying at the bottom of New York harbor by now. So we owe him a great deal, and I'm glad to be able to help him by taking him back with us to Rosewood. . . . Why, what's the matter?"

Coral's head was bent, and he could not see her face, but he recognized tension in every line of her body. When she looked up at him, her eyes were dark and troubled.

"I never realized you planned to return to England. I thought we were going home to Ireland."

"No, no, I want to introduce you to my family, dearest—for now they are your family too—and Rosewood itself will be ours some day. The sooner you get to know your new home, the better."

She twisted her fingers together unhappily, asking: "Do we have to?"

"Of course. Why, what's wrong? I'd have thought you would be interested to see the place where I lived as a boy. Why do you look so worried?"

"Well, I'm afraid that your family may not like me. . . . And I'm sure I shall not do you credit."

"What nonsense! My father will fall in love with you on sight, I'm certain of that. Oh, he's a cantankerous old stick in some respects, I admit, but he's still got an eye for a pretty woman. You'll be able to twist him around your little finger."

"I wonder. . . . And what about your sister? It may be more difficult to win her approval, I suspect."

"Garnet? Never! . . . You'll take to each other on sight, I promise you. She's as much of a madcap as you are, in her own way."

"But she's a young lady of breeding and position, married to the major-general, you said. She lives in another world altogether—"

"Not a bit of it. I told you, she actually served in the Dragoons, dressed up in my uniform, passing herself off as a boy. A girl who'd do that would hardly be the sort of dignified snob you seem to imagine!"

"Perhaps not, and yet . . ." Coral flung her arms around Gerard on a sudden impulse and held him close. "Oh, Gerard—I *do* want to go back to Ireland. I *don't* want to go to England. I'm afraid . . ."

"Afraid?"

He looked into her face, studying her green eyes, that were now wide and apprehensive.

"My dearest love, what in the world is there to be afraid of?"

"I don't know. I just have this terrible feeling that something bad will happen there. . . . You know I get these feelings sometimes—it's the gypsy blood in my veins, I believe—"

"Then we'll hear no more of such superstitions, my lady, for I promise you, you'll be happy at Rosewood—and one day you'll be mistress of the house. . . ."

There was a discreet rapping at the door, and Coral disengaged herself from the embrace, saying, "Come in."

It was Jem who entered, but a very different Jem. His face pink and shining, his hair neatly slicked down with a wetted comb, his burly torso encased in a bottle-green tailcoat that had belonged to Paul, with Gerard's second-best neckcloth tucked neatly under his chin. Jem was completely transformed.

"My word! You look quite the dandy, doesn't he, Coral? Quite a change from when you saw him earlier, I daresay?"

Coral bit her lip, but merely said, "Yes . . . quite a change."

When Jem's appearance had been duly approved,

ROSEWOOD

Gerard continued: "You're just in time to help me persuade Mrs. Mallory that she is going to be very happy in her new home."

"New home, sir?" Jem looked puzzled. "Be you a-going to move, then?"

"Well, we can't stay here as guests of Mr. and Mrs. Maguire forever! And it's high time we made our way home to England. I'm sure you're as eager to see Rosewood again as I am, eh, Jem?"

There was a long pause. Gerard, expecting an enthusiastic response, turned to stare at the young manservant in surprise.

Jem had not moved. His face was quite blank, as if all thought and feeling had been wiped from his expression, as a damp cloth removes chalk marks from a blackboard.

"Well, Jem?" Gerard persisted. "Don't tell me that *you* have some odd notions about the place too? You're not afraid of Rosewood, I hope?"

Jem swallowed, and took a deep breath.

He could not tell the truth, that was certain. He could not explain that he was reluctant to go to Rosewood, because he was afraid of the consequences. He was afraid to meet Gerard's sister again.

A picture rose up in his mind, as clear and vivid as if it had been before him in reality, instead of a memory from the past, the not-so-distant past—less than a year ago. The scene was a deserted cottage in a little village of Benedict, on the Patuxent River; the time was late afternoon on an August day, during the long march toward Washington. The players in the scene were Jem himself, purposefully throwing off his naval uniform and advancing toward the bed in an upstairs room—and Garnet Mallory, who backed away from him. . . . She was naked, and she was at his mercy.

No one in the world knew that they were there. If she cried out for help, she would cry in vain, for there was no one to hear her. And Jem, who had loved the

young Mallory girl ever since they were children together—loved her hopelessly, bitterly, knowing he could never win her—was about to gain the prize he had coveted for years.

He could visualize her now as she stood there, her back against the simple wooden four-poster, her short, springing hair cropped like a boy's, but the look in her wide, frightened eyes was totally feminine. And her body, slim and taut, tense as a wild animal at bay, was temptingly female, from her firm young breasts with their erect, quivering nipples like delicate rose-buds, to the long, smooth curve of her waist, and the instinctive posture of her hips, as she turned away from him, her hands laced together in a vain attempt to cover the soft mound of Venus and its veil of lustrous curls.

He advanced a pace, and the sight of her beauty almost robbed him of speech, as he stammered huskily:

"I do love you so . . ."

She tried to hold him off, but her attempt at self-defense was hopeless. He threw himself upon her, and she fell back across the bed, an easy prey to his lust.

He remembered how he had covered her with hungry kisses—and how she had gradually ceased to struggle—giving way, inch by inch, to his demanding assault, until at last she had given in to him completely, and he had entered the forbidden territory and taken possession of it.

At the time, he was totally obsessed by desire, and had no thought for the consequences. Afterward, she had dismissed him with hatred and contempt in her voice. Since then he had seen her only once, and that very briefly.

Had she ever been able to forgive him for that insane moment of conquest, when he had forcibly ravished her? How would she revenge herself upon him, when next they met—at Rosewood?

He could not tell. Nor could he make any excuse

ROSEWOOD

to avoid such a meeting. He was committed now to accompany Master Gerard and his lovely bride, and if Miss Garnet denounced him as a villain and a rapist, he would have to take his punishment.

Slowly he licked his lips and replied to Gerard's question, tonelessly:

"No sir. I'm not afraid. . . ."

In the days that followed, there was a great deal of work to be done. Gerard booked three passages upon the transatlantic sailing ship that was to convey them to Southampton, and then Coral broke the news to Dermot and Martha that they would soon be leaving New York.

"Sailing across the ocean? My, how exciting. I've never been further than Long Island myself, but I daresay sea voyages are all very fine and dandy once you get accustomed to the motion. I was in a row-boat once, and I got sick to my *s,t,o,m,a,c,h*—and I finished up with my shoes full of pond-water—but don't let that put you off at all, because I daresay Mr. Carrington wasn't too much of a navigator," concluded Martha.

Dermot, a little more soberly, kissed his niece, saying: "I shall miss you, dear child. Of course I knew I could not expect to keep my family around me forever, and at least—" He turned to Rosalie as he added: "*You're* not going to desert me, are you, my pet? You and Paul will stay on in America for a good while yet, I hope?"

"I hope so, Uncle, but I cannot tell exactly what Paul's plans may be," she replied. "I wrote to him in Washington the other day, but so far I have received no answer."

"You don't think he may raise some objection to our adopting Blaise and taking him home to England?" Gerard asked.

"Adopting Blaise? What's all this?" frowned old

NEW WORLD . . .

Dermot. "It's the first I've heard of it. Why should you adopt your sister's boy?"

Coral soothed him quickly. "Don't trouble your head over that, Uncle. We're simply taking Blaise back to England for a while, so he can be educated there—and so that Rosalie and Paul may enjoy a second honeymoon on their own."

She smiled at Rosalie, and added: "I'm sure everything will work out very well. I expect you'll hear from Paul any day now."

Meanwhile, Coral took care to make herself indispensable to little Blaise; she bathed him, dressed him, coaxed him to eat his meals, and took him out on a series of excursions to explore the city. Inevitably, the boy fell under the spell of his pretty, lively aunt, and when she asked him how he would like to go on a long boat trip with her and Uncle Gerard, he accepted the suggestion with alacrity.

Rosalie watched the bonds of love strengthen between her sister and her child—glad for them both—and tried to ignore the pain of her own breaking heart. Again and again, she told herself that for Paul's sake, for the sake of Blaise himself, this was the best possible solution. At night she lay awake in the master bedroom, feeling desperately alone.

And then, one night as she tossed and turned upon the vast double bed and fell into an uneasy doze, the bedroom door opened quietly, but she did not hear it.

A shadow crossed the room, but she did not stir.

Silently, the newcomer peeled off his clothes and tossed them aside; then he pulled back the sheet and slipped into the bed.

The first thing that Rosalie knew was a mouth against her lips, then a sweet tongue invading her with a kiss, two strong arms about her, and a questing hand that slid down to her thighs . . .

In darkness and silence, she might have been terrified by such an awakening, but the feel of his hand, the tang of his kisses, the warm, musky scent of his

ROSEWOOD

body against her—these all added up to one thing only.

"Paul!" she gasped surrendering herself to her invisible husband.

"My darling girl . . ." His voice purred in her ear, and he began to coax her with his supple fingers as if he were a sculptor, molding the living clay into vivid shape. His hands were everywhere upon her skin; his mouth explored her neck, shoulders, breasts, as she shivered with delight—and his strong embrace swept her away on a tide of passion. She felt the hard impatience of his manhood, thrusting for admission, and she grew moist and eager to receive him.

Again and again he transfixed her in a crescendo of mounting ecstasy, his narrow hips moving with an ever-quickenning tempo between her thighs as she enfolded him within the circle of her love. At last, when they lay together, breathing deeply and feeling a glow of perfect contentment spreading through their bodies, minds and hearts, she whispered: "You came back to me."

"Your letter said all I hoped to hear. I could not have believed you loved me so much. . . . You have made a great sacrifice for me, I know that, and I promise you that you will never regret it, my darling."

The morning of the Mallorys' departure was not seasonable. The hot summer weather had become even more humid, and now a sea mist rolled in from the ocean, shrouding Battery Point in a clammy curtain of gray. Two carriages pulled up on the dockside by the gangplank that led on to the sailing ship, where it rode at anchor in the harbor.

From the first coach, Jem Bolt scrambled down and began to unpack the luggage, while little Blaise, dancing with excitement, skipped about and did his best to "help" with the bags, bundles and trunks that were to go aboard.

From the second coach, Gerard assisted Coral to

alight, followed by Paul and Rosalie, who had come along with Martha and Dermot to see the travelers off on their voyage.

Dermot looked up at the masts of the schooner, which seemed almost to fade into the mist above their heads, and quoted glumly:

"One foot in sea, and one on shore. . . . You've not picked a very auspicious day to begin your journey, I fear."

"Oh, Mr. Maguire, do you really think so?" Martha clucked like a distraught mother hen. "Are you sure it will be safe for them to set sail? Might there not be icebergs out there—or waterspouts—or hurricanes, perhaps?"

"In the height of summer? I hardly think so," smiled Gerard. "This is nothing but coastal fog. Once we get into open water, the weather may very well improve."

"Well, I certainly do hope so, because when all's said and done, when you're on the bosom of the ocean you're in the hands of God, and though I don't wish to criticize Him in any way, you must admit there are a whole lot cozier places to be. . . . I'll be saying a prayer for you all from the moment you leave, Coral dear, and I'll never stop till I get a letter to tell me you've arrived safely."

"Thank you." Coral forced a smile.

"I assure you, there's no need to be anxious," Gerard told her cheerfully, and he called across to Blaise, as the child raced around them: "We're looking forward to the expedition, aren't we, young 'un?"

"Yes, Papa. I mean—Uncle Gerard."

The boy threw the words carelessly back over his shoulder, as he rushed off yet again, and Paul caught Rosalie's eye.

"It will not be long before he forgets that I ever existed," Paul said softly. "You see how happy he is with Gerard, already."

ROSEWOOD

"Yes. Do you think he will forget me too—just as easily?" asked Rosalie.

"Come, it's time for us to go aboard," Gerard continued.

The two sisters embraced once again before parting, and Rosalie took her little son into her arms for the last time.

"You're not really afraid, are you?" Gerard asked, slipping one arm around Coral's waist.

"A little. Isn't it natural to be afraid of the unknown? For that's where we are going."

She gazed along the trim lines of the ship's prow, into the thick gray mist ahead, and felt again that sudden chill of fear.

"My dearest love . . . you have me with you, to keep you safe from any harm," said Gerard. "Now, take Blaise aboard, while I give Jem a hand to shift the last of the luggage, for I believe the captain is impatient to cast off."

Coral took Blaise by the hand and led him up the gangplank, finding a place at the ship's rail where they could stand and wave at their friends and relatives below.

As Gerard shouldered a heavy valise, Rosalie moved across to join him for a final word. A few yards away, Martha was giving Paul and Dermot her considered opinions upon oceangoing vessels, the state of the weather, the state of the nation, the price of cabbages, and the art of conversation. Under cover of this, Rosalie and Gerard were able to talk without being overheard.

"Don't look so anxious," he told her. "You know that Coral and I will do everything we can for Blaise. We shall look after him as if he were our own."

"I know . . ." Rosalie took a long breath, and then continued: "And that is why I trust you with him—for it is no more than the simple truth. I've never told this to any other living soul—but now I want you to know. You remember that afternoon, long ago, on the

river at Cappelquin, when you and I were in the little rowing boat?"

Gerard stared at her speechlessly, fearing what she was about to say.

She glanced back once more at Paul, to make sure that he was out of earshot, then continued: "Cherish him, my dear, for Blaise is your son, and mine. . . . But I beg you not to speak of this to anyone else. Above all—Coral must never know. Promise me that you will never tell her."

His mind in a turmoil, Gerard nodded. "I promise. . . ."

A whistle blew somewhere aloft, and the deckhands began to untie the long mooring ropes. At the ship's rail, Coral and Blaise waved and called to Gerard: "Hurry up. Don't get left behind!"

In a daze, Gerard grabbed the last items of luggage and joined them on board in the nick of time. The gangplank rattled down, and with a metallic roar the anchor chain was hauled up, dripping and glittering.

"Goodbye, my dears, and God be with you!" called Rosalie.

Paul, Martha and Dermot stood beside her at the edge of the wharf, as the great ship moved slowly and silently off into the mists; and they stayed there, waving, until the schooner was out of sight.

Out of sight—and into the unknown.

Part Two



Old World

Chapter One

SLEEPING AND WAKING

World travelers who follow the sun, or race against it, have to accustom themselves to changes in time, setting their clocks and watches forward or back as they circle the earth.

So we, too, as we voyage from the New World to the Old, must step back in time, and alter—not the clocks—but the calendars, as our story retreats from an American summer to an English springtime.

Sunset, upon an April day in the county of Surrey, not far from Guildford; and Rosewood Hall, that serene and pleasant mansion, bathed in the golden light of evening. Surely, if Coral could have seen it at this moment, all her fears would have been allayed? And yet—there was tension here, all the same; tension of a very special kind.

“Oh, Brock, look at me . . . look at my shape! Will I ever have a waist again?”

Garnet Savage stood in front of the long pier glass by her bed, and gazed ruefully at her own reflection. She was dressed only in her nightgown, a voluminous confection of sheerest silk, so fine that it was almost transparent.

Indeed, from where her husband sat in the little round armchair at the other side of the room, it was transparent indeed, for the level rays of the sun, stealing through the open window behind Garnet, outlined her figure through the sheer material as if she were quite naked.

She had her arms raised to her head, for she had

been in the process of unfastening her chignon of curls for the night, and brushing her hair before going to bed. Her dark chestnut hair rippled over her shoulders and glinted darkly in the fading sunlight.

Her posture lifted her breasts, and Brock felt his muscles tighten at the sight of that superb bosom—a little rounder, a little fuller than when he had married her last summer, but as perfectly shaped as ever, with nipples rose-tipped and tantalizing. In his imagination, he recalled the ravishing delight he discovered anew each time he fondled her; each time he kissed those magic aureoles, saluting their sweet firmness with his lips. . . .

God, but he was lucky; for, although his first marriage had been a pointless tragedy, ending in Lydia's untimely death after a mere ten months, his second marriage—itsself only nine months old—had already recompensed him in every way; with Garnet he had found happiness such as he had never imagined possible, and he knew that this happiness would continue to grow and mature, and become a lasting joy to both of them, for as long as they should live.

Nine months only . . . and yet what a lot had happened in that short space of time. He had come home in triumph with his bride, to meet her father at Rosewood Hall; and after a tender, brief honeymoon, he had been forced to leave her there when he was recalled to duty with his regiment in the long, unsatisfactory struggle against the United States, the struggle that finished ignominiously with the tactical defeat and withdrawal of the British troops at New Orleans.

Now he had come home again, to find what wonders nature could achieve in a short while.

His eyes traveled down from the silhouette of Garnet's bosom, to the ample curve below her diaphragm, the roundness that was both a prominence and a promise . . . the promise of new life, very soon to be delivered.

"How can you love anyone so enormous? Look at

OLD WORLD

the way I bulge!" she wailed comically, turning to him, exaggerating the line of her figure by the way she stood, and thrusting her pelvis forward.

Brock rose and walked across the room to his wife, putting his arms around her.

"I was just thanking God for my good fortune at this very moment," he told her truthfully. "For I must be the luckiest man on earth."

"You're a terrible flatterer, but I love you for it," Garnet said with a smile, nestling in the comfortable warmth of his embrace. "Where is she now, the slim youngster in a boy's uniform who rode by your side through Portugal and Spain? Whatever became of Ensign Garnet Mallory?"

"She became Mrs. Broccard Savage, wife of the major-general and soon to be the mother of his child."

Brock's strong hands tightened about her, stroking her slender shoulders and the soft temptation of her hips, letting his fingers stray to the warm cleft between her thighs—

And then stopping short, holding himself in check. Even as he longed for further intimacies, he knew that he had to restrain his impulses. Not now; not yet.

"Soon, Brock," she whispered, reading his thoughts. "Soon, I promise you."

He released her then, and she moved toward the bed, continuing: "The doctor is very pleased with my progress. He says that the baby may arrive any day now. That is why I have to take all the rest I can: I must conserve my energies."

"Any day?" he repeated, watching her as she climbed in to the great four-poster.

"Yes. Even today, perhaps—although I hope not."

"What do you mean?" he frowned. "Surely the sooner the waiting is over—"

"Yes, but do you not know the old rhyme that goes: 'Monday's child is fair of face, Tuesday's child is full of grace . . . Wednesday's child is full of woe'?—and today is Wednesday, Brock."

"Pah! An old wives' tale—I won't believe such nonsense," Brock said sharply and rubbed his forehead, turning away.

She sensed what was wrong instinctively, and as she lay back against the pillows, she asked: "Is your head hurting you again?"

"It's nothing."

He kept his back to her, so she should not see the marks of strain upon his face.

"Ever since that wound in your temple—when you were shot during the attack upon Vitoria—I know it has troubled you from time to time—"

"It's nothing, I tell you!" he repeated, almost angrily. "I have been thinking too much, worrying too much. That's what brings on headaches. . . . I need a breath of fresh air to clear my brain, nothing more."

"Why don't you take a turn in the garden before the light goes?" Garnet suggested. "It's too early for you to come to bed. Have a stroll in the park, and come back to me presently."

"Very well, my love. That might blow away the cobwebs from my mind, indeed."

He kissed her once more and left the room, running down the wide stone staircase into the main hall, then out through the double doors on to the front portico, where a flight of steps curved from beneath classical pillars to the gravel drive.

He brushed the back of his hand across his brow. A long scar ran from the roots of his hair, across his temple, narrowly avoiding his left eye; and he tried to force the nagging, grinding ache to stop—to banish it by sheer willpower. He would never admit to Garnet how seriously these intermittent bouts of pain disabled him.

He began to stroll around the corner of the house to the west wing, which was still gilded by the dying rays of the sun, as it sank between the trees on the horizon, and he took in long breaths of sweet evening

air, perfumed by spring flowers, trying to calm his agitation.

What had he got to worry about, after all?

As he had said to Garnet, he was a very fortunate man. In his early forties, married to the most bewitching girl he had ever known—yes, she was twenty years younger, but what of that? They loved one another passionately. *Passionately* . . . He thought of all the nights and days they had spent in one another's arms, exploring the deepest mysteries of love, and the pulse in his temple beat even harder.

He was at the peak of his military career; even the last defeat in America had done nothing to tarnish the reputation he had achieved in the Spanish triumphs—but what would the next move be? Why had he not been recalled to service, and given another command? Could it be that the chiefs-of-staff were looking for younger men to take over the reins now? Had he already been cast aside, as if he had outlived his usefulness?

And if his future as a fighting man was at stake, what of his future as a husband and father? For Broccard Savage was the second son of a large country family, with a vast rural estate in Wessex; but the farmland had been entailed upon the eldest boy, Brock's brother Miles—and he knew that he could not expect any great share of the family fortune. If he grew too old or too ill to soldier, how should he provide for his wife . . . and for the child to be?

Walking on, around the black sentinel of a cypress tree, he suddenly came across two other members of the Rosewood household, enjoying the last of the sunshine.

Garnet's father, old Sir George Mallory, sat in a wicker chair with a rug wrapped about his legs, attended by his housekeeper, Mrs. Bolt.

"Ah, my dear Savage. Taking a short constitutional?" wheezed the old gentleman. "I'd join you with pleasure, but this damn leg of mine has been

playing me up again. I'm plagued by the rheumatics, and that's a fact. . . . Ain't that so, Mrs. Bolt?"

The housekeeper, as round and cozy as a huge cottage loaf, bobbed a curtsy in Brock's direction, and made reassuring noises.

"I'll rub your poor old bones with my special salve, Sir George. That'll help you lie easier in your bed. . . . Now come you in, for the sun's going down, and there's a nasty treacherous nip in the air . . . it's past your bedtime, sir!"

"Oh, very well, very well. You see how she bullies me, Savage?" Sir George chuckled, and choked, and coughed, while Mrs. Bolt thumped him on the back. "Leave me be, woman. You're forever pummeling and pestering me! But it's true, the day's over . . . it'll be dark soon. Help me up, both of you."

Between them, they hoisted the old man to his feet, and he stood for a moment, leaning heavily upon his malacca cane, recovering his breath.

"How's Garnet this evening?" he inquired suddenly. "Quite well, I hope?"

"She's in excellent health, sir. But like you, she goes to bed early."

"Aha, yes—she's like me indeed. Like me in many ways." Sir George gazed into space, and a proud smile creased the corners of his mouth.

There had been a time when he took no interest in his daughter, simply because she *was* a daughter, and he was totally concerned with his son, Gerard, eager to see the young man follow in his footsteps, with an illustrious career in the army. But of course Gerard had no great relish for the military life, and he had run away to be an actor, leaving his sister to don his uniform instead.

When Sir George learned the truth (after a malicious letter arrived from his Irish niece Bella, informing her uncle of Gerard's perfidy), the old gentleman had flown into a rage. So apoplectic was he, in fact, that he had collapsed at the height of his fury, and

OLD WORLD

suffered a severe stroke, which had nearly killed him outright.

Devoted nursing by Mrs. Bolt, and a sound constitution, had brought him to an almost total recovery, though when Garnet came home with her husband, she had been shocked to discover how much more frail her father seemed to be.

But their homecoming was better than any medicine for Sir George. When he had been told the whole amazing story of Garnet's masquerade as a serving officer of dragoons—and when he had welcomed Major-General Savage as his son-in-law and learned of Garnet's gallantry under fire and her heroism in the face of death—Sir George had totally revised his opinion of his daughter.

In future, she was to be the apple of his eye, and Gerard's name would never be mentioned at Rosewood again. As soon as possible, Sir George sent for his lawyer and made a new will. Gerard was to be disinherited, and everything—the house, estate and property—was made over to Garnet, and to such children as she should bear.

For Sir George was determined that the progeny of such a marriage—the offspring of Brock and Garnet, with the Mallory blood running in their veins—would inevitably be a brood of boys, a troop of young soldiers, to carry on the family tradition.

Now he inquired again, solicitously. He was not only thinking of Garnet, but of the grandson he awaited so impatiently.

"How is she, in herself?" he asked Brock. "Any sign of the happy event, heh? The new recruit ready to appear on parade?"

Brock tried to remind his father-in-law that he must not jump to conclusions. "The doctor says it could happen at any time now, sir. But of course we don't know that it will be a son. You may have a granddaughter instead."

"Stuff and nonsense!" The old man puffed out his

ROSEWOOD

cheeks and reddened angrily. "Of course it'll be a boy—bound to be, ain't that so, Mrs. Bolt?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Miss Garnet'll be brought to bed of a fine bouncing boy. You mark my words. . . . She's carrying high, you see—that's a sure sign. I can always tell."

"Yes, yes, leave it to the women, Savage—they know about these things." Sir George held out an arm to the housekeeper for support. "Come along. The sun's set at last—we must go. Time to turn in, eh?"

Huffing and puffing, he made his way slowly back into the house, with Mrs. Bolt's assistance. Brock resumed his walk through the grounds.

More old wives' tales! "Wednesday's child"—"carrying high"—Brock tried not to let such antique folklore depress him. Very soon now the baby would be born, and the long, anxious waiting would be over.

Hardly noticing where he was going, he strolled on, down the long slope of the lawn, and through the formal rose garden. At the far end, an archway had been cut in the tall yew hedge, and Brock suddenly stopped, listening.

He heard music and laughter, the sound of a fiddle playing a lively jig and the low, confidential murmur of voices—men and women, talking and joking together, an air of excitement.

He followed the sound, making his way through the gate in the yew hedge, and then drew back into the shadows, so he might remain unseen.

Beyond the hedge lay the orchard, with scores of fruit trees that blurred into darkness, and here and there the black shapes of the trees were stabbed with light from candle lanterns. Brock could see tiny splashes of pink and white, where some of the branches were beginning to break out in a foam of blossom.

And under the trees was a throng of people—lads and lasses, some dancing, some embracing, all young,

OLD WORLD

all intoxicated with the excitement of the spring night. Brock recognized most of them immediately: Rosie and Lucy, two of the serving maids from the house—Pip the bootboy—several of the stable-lads. And there were milkmaids from the dairy, and young laborers from the home farm—they had all come together, under the spell of the music.

It was a gypsy tinker who played the fiddle. Brown as a nut, with a shock of black hair and a wicked grin, he sat on an upturned bushel basket, and drove the music along as if his life depended on it, playing faster and faster, urging the young couples to wilder and still wilder excesses.

It was as if he had them all under a magic spell, and they could not help themselves. They had thrown aside all restraint and abandoned themselves to the throbbing rhythm of the dance.

Abandoned, yes—for as Brock watched, he saw that the music was flinging the young couples together in a ferment of sensuality, and sometimes a boy here, or a girl there would be carried away entirely by the accelerating tempo and suddenly break off to drag their partners, into a reckless embrace. Arms encircled waists, and hands ventured everywhere—breasts, thighs, hips, bellies—teasing and tickling; all in the grip of the same sexual frenzy.

Brock stood unseen in the darkness, and waited. Mrs. Bolt had been wrong, surely; there was no nip of frost about this evening. The night was soft and balmy, and as intoxicating as champagne. . . . The air even felt warm upon his skin; and clearly these carefree dancers felt warm too, for as he looked, he felt a sudden surge of excitement. A lusty stable lad was unfastening the ribbon of a girl's bodice, and her full, ripe breasts tumbled free. Another girl, laughing, let her skirt fall and stepped out of it, while a third exultantly pulled her dress up over her head and tossed it away. She was wearing nothing beneath it, and now danced joyously, completely nude, while the young

men swung her from one to the other, and when she reached the end of the chain of eager partners, the last one caught her in his brown arms, and bore her down with him, rolling her over in the soft green grass . . .

It would have been a crime to interrupt such a celebration of youth and love and happiness; Brock knew that he must steal away without revealing himself, and leave them to their pleasures.

He knew, too, from the hard ache in his loins, how his body longed to join in these timeless rites—and as he walked slowly back to the house, he recognized that this was one of the prime reasons for his tension and restlessness.

He loved Garnet with all his heart and mind—yes, but with all his body too, and now she was caught up in the working-out of her own female destiny, and he could not encroach upon her there. He had to bide his time and wait, and endure the frustration that was his part in these mysteries.

When at last he reached the bedroom, lit now by one flickering candle, he began to undress quietly, for Garnet's eyes were closed and he did not want to wake her.

But as he let his breeches fall, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the long glass. The hair on his chest now had a sprinkling of pepper-and-salt among the darker curls, but his build was as powerful as ever, from broad shoulders down to tapering, muscular flanks, and he noticed that his sex was still aroused and impatient.

And at the same moment Garnet opened her eyes, saying gently: "It's all right. I'm not asleep—"

She broke off, seeing his condition; he picked up his nightshirt quickly and shifted to conceal his excitement.

"Oh, Brock," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I know how it is—and I wish . . . I do wish . . ."

"It's all right. It's the springtime in my blood. It's

OLD WORLD

the season of the year, when the sap rises—don't concern yourself, my darling," he said quickly, slipping into bed beside her.

He pinched out the bedside candle, and put his arms around her in the darkness.

"Just hold me close," he murmured. "That's all. Just hold me."

She sighed—a long, unhappy sigh—and clung to him, trying in every way she could to compensate him for his frustration.

"I want you too," she breathed in his ear. "So very much . . ."

"My dearest love," he said, and kissed her, restraining himself, so that his kiss was a benediction, rather than the deep, burning communion that he desired. "I let myself get carried away by the sight and sound of some rustic festivities. The servants are dancing to a gypsy fiddler in the orchard, and it unsettled me a little. . . . Listen—you can hear the music, in the distance."

They lay very still, and sure enough the liquid notes of the violin came to them upon the night air, from far away; but it was not a hectic jig any more. Now the mood had changed and the gypsy drew a fervent, romantic melody from the instrument—a song to touch the heart and catch the soul with its wordless longing.

Brock could picture the scene in the orchard now; most of the candles must have burnt out by this time, and the dancers would have withdrawn into the shadows, pairing off under the trees in the soft darkness of the night, their bodies entwining.

Garnet let herself drift away into the mists of sleep yet again. Her whole existence seemed to be a series of dreams these days, sleeping and waking. . . . A dream of love, and a dream of new life blossoming within her. Nothing else was quite real. Nothing except her love for Brock. Love and Brock—they were two names for the same thing . . .

ROSEWOOD

The haunting music floated through her mind like a wisp of smoke, and mingled with other tunes, other times . . .

She remembered the plaintive lament of the Spanish guitar, on a velvet night in Spain, when Brock had revealed to her that he knew she was a girl, in boy's disguise.

She remembered Brock the first time she had kissed him, in a moment of delirious passion, when she knew that he loved her as she loved him: the blinding revelation of that discovery, and the joy that followed.

She remembered Brock lying naked beside her upon a golden beach in Bermuda. They had spent a perfect day together, quite alone, uninterrupted by anyone else, swimming, basking in the sun, making love. She could still taste the thrilling tang of salt water and male sweat upon his body, and feel the rapture of his hands as he caressed her.

Cool water—hot sunlight—naked skin . . . a potent combination to enchant the senses.

And then she found herself gazing up into another face; another strong, male torso lay close beside her, but this was a younger man—not much more than a boy—fair-haired, exultant, his head still wet from their swim together, laughing down at her as she lay on the bank beside the fishpond.

Of course—it was Jem Bolt; she had been fifteen years old, and he not much older. An impromptu swimming lesson had turned into another kind of tuition, as they investigated the incredible secrets of each other's bodies.

"Ain't you never seen a man before?" Jem had asked her. "There's a lot as you've still got to learn, I reckon."

And he pulled her toward him, his hands teaching her new sensations that she had never even dreamed of. It was her initiation into the strange ceremony of love.

Some time later, Brock awakened with a start. He

OLD WORLD

did not know how long he had been asleep, and the room was completely dark.

Had he been dreaming? If he had, he had already forgotten his dream, for he had come back to reality with a shock that had put everything else out of his thoughts. And if he had dreamed, it must have been some kind of nightmare, for he felt a cold sweat upon his body.

He stretched out instinctively for warmth and comfort, for the gentle reassurance of Garnet's presence beside him. But his leg—his hand—met no answering pressure. He explored further; he was alone in the bed.

He lay and thought for a moment. Perhaps she had been roused by a call of nature and taken herself off to find relief.

Then he realized that the place in the bed where she had been lying was quite cold; she had not left the warm imprint of her body there, and that must mean she had been gone for some time.

Now wide awake, he sat up and lit the candle.

He looked around. Her negligee lay where she had discarded it, across a chair, and her bedroom slippers were still neatly arranged beside it. But of Garnet herself there was no sign.

Thoroughly alarmed, he scrambled out of bed, climbing into his trousers and stuffing his nightshirt down into them. He would not waste time by dressing completely.

Pulling on his old *robe-de-chambre*, a garment of worn, sand-colored velvet, trimmed with rough brown fur, which had done service through many military campaigns on two continents, he hurried out of the room and down the stairs, preparing to search the house.

He went first to the drawing room, but there was no one there. He tried the library. Perhaps she could not sleep, and had gone to find a book to read? But she was not there, either. She was not in the dining room; he made his way through the green-baize door

to the servants' hall, and checked the kitchen, the pantry, the scullery. Had she felt hungry, and come down in quest of food?

Each time, he drew a blank.

Then as he was about to leave the servants' quarters, he shivered. Even through his old robe he could feel the chill of the night air. Someone had left a door unfastened.

He investigated and found that the side door into the stable yard was wide open. This, he knew, was against the rules of the house; after nightfall, every door and window was supposed to be shut securely. Possibly, as an aftermath of the riotous assembly in the orchard, the rules had been broken tonight. No doubt an erring kitchenmaid would be creeping back soon, after a final tryst with her swain.

But he had to make quite sure. Something spurred him on, and he decided to take a look outside, just in case.

He walked out quickly, and felt the cold, clammy shock of the cobblestones underfoot. Somewhere in one of the looseboxes, a horse whinnyed and stamped. On he went, leaving the cobbles behind, and following a gravel path that bit into his bare feet, then on to the gentle dampness of grass.

An owl hooted; he redoubled his pace.

He had mentioned the pagan celebration in the orchard to Garnet; had she, in some odd way, felt curious and decided to go and see for herself what was happening? He blundered through the rose garden, careless of thorny fingers that plucked at him as he passed, and opened the gate in the yew hedge once more.

There was nobody there.

The candles were out; the tinker had packed up his fiddle and departed. Brock peered into the gloom under the trees, and felt his trouser legs heavy and sodden with dew. Even the most ardent lovers would

OLD WORLD

have retreated in search of a warmer and dryer couch by this time.

She was not here, and he had wasted his time in looking for her. But where else could she be?

He felt the telltale warning of the pulse in his temple start up and tried to keep calm. He was totally lost now, without the least notion of where he should look next.

He paused, trying to get his bearings, and then found himself moving on again. He didn't even know where he was going. It was as if his limbs had taken control—his body, not his brain, in command.

Blindly, he broke into a run: through the orchard, down into the water meadows that bordered the home farm, across a gently sloping field. . . . He seemed to recollect that there was a pond somewhere near here, a fishpond, fringed by pollarded willows, and overhung by an alder tree . . .

Then he caught sight of something white, glimmering ahead of him—a pale shape that lay sprawled across the darkened grass, beside the pond.

For a wild moment, he had the conviction that she was dead. His head whirled. He imagined her throwing herself into the water—drowning, clambering back to the bank with one last desperate effort, and collapsing there, lifeless.

Hardly knowing what he did, Brock flung himself onto his knees beside Garnet as she lay on the wet grass in her thin nightdress, and took her hand between his. Thank God, she was still warm. He bent his head to see if she were breathing, and realized with a shock of relief that she was drawing long, regular breaths, her eyes were shut. She was fast asleep.

Somehow, under some mysterious compulsion, she had risen from her bed in the middle of the night. Sleepwalking, she must have made her way out of the house and through the garden, to this spot. A favorite place, he seemed to recall, from her childhood.

He tried to pick her up without disturbing her,

having some fearful half-memory that it was dangerous to awaken someone who was sleepwalking, but as soon as he put his arms around her, she opened her eyes—and smiled.

“Brock—” she whispered thankfully, and nestled into his embrace.

So that too was just another old wives’ tale, thank heaven. She was safe, and well. Summoning all his strength, he lifted her up and began the long journey back to the house.

He was halfway there when he felt her stiffen in his arms. Her body convulsed, and she uttered a strange, almost animal cry.

“What is it?” he asked urgently. “Are you hurt? What is the matter?”

“A pain,” she gasped. “Brock, take me to bed—and then fetch Mrs. Bolt. . . . I think—it has begun.”

Once her labor had started, everything happened very quickly. Mrs. Bolt, in a tent-like nightgown, with her gray hair flying in two braided plaits, took charge of the proceedings, and Brock was banished to the drawing room, where he waited, and paced, and drank a certain amount of Sir George’s best brandy. A sleepy groom was roused and dispatched to fetch a doctor, and at last, after a time that seemed to Brock as short as the blink of an eye and as long as eternity, he was allowed to return to the bedchamber.

Garnet was pale as a ghost, and her face was shining with sweat, but she lay back against a mound of pillows with a blissful smile upon her lips, and a swaddled bundle in her arms.

“There, my little love,” she whispered. “You must meet your papa. Brock, come and say hello to your daughter.”

Brock looked down at the infant, holding his breath.

She lay very still; and she was a very tiny baby. Her features were absolutely exquisite; she was her

OLD WORLD

mother in miniature. Like her mother at this moment, she too was very white, and her skin was as delicate and as smooth as cream, while the fuzz of downy hair upon her head was raven-black.

"Isn't she the most-perfect baby you ever saw in your whole life?" Garnet asked proudly.

"She is—beautiful. But so fragile, so pale—like ivory . . ."

"That's because she is so precious. But the doctor says she is strong and healthy, so you are not to worry. . . . There's only one thing that I am sorry about," Garnet added as an afterthought.

"And what is that?"

"Wednesday's child. Poor little thing, so full of woe . . ."

Brock smiled and stretched across to take his watch out of the embroidered pocket, where it hung at night above the bed head.

"Not at all. Time moves on, my love, and as you see it is now nearly four in the morning. Our daughter has been born on a Thursday. What does the old rhyme have to say about that?"

"She must take after her parents, then, for she will be a traveler." Garnet smiled down at her daughter fondly, and quoted:

"'Thursday's child has far to go . . .'"

Chapter Two

RECALLED TO ARMS

"Would you like to take her for a moment?"

Garnet offered the sleeping child to Brock. Uncertainly, he received the tiny cocoon of silk and lace, and stared down incredulously at his baby daughter, lost for words. That this miniature person—so perfect, so miraculous—should have been created from the union of their love. . . . Perhaps nothing in his life had ever stirred him quite so strangely.

Huskily, he said at last, "She is very beautiful . . . Like her mother . . . but so fragile, I am almost afraid to hold her in my hands. She really *is* like a precious carving in ivory, as you say."

"And that shall be her name," Garnet smiled.

"What?"

"Ivory. Why not? It's a lovely name, and it suits her so well. My Mama chose unusually when she called me Garnet. Why shouldn't we follow her example?"

"Ivory. . . . Yes—you're right. She can have no other name. Ivory she shall be."

The infant stirred in her sleep, opening her mouth in a tiny, elegant yawn, and Brock hastened to return her to her mother.

"You'd better have her back. I don't want to disturb her," he said. "And anyway I have another errand to perform. I must go and break the news to Sir George, as soon as he wakes."

Garnet sighed gently. "Poor papa. He won't be

OLD WORLD

delighted, I'm afraid. You know he was determined that we should present him with a grandson."

She looked at the child at her breast, her face radiant.

"But I don't care. We wouldn't change you, would we, Miss Ivory, for all the grandsons in the world." Then she, too, smothered a yawn, and settled back comfortably to rest. It had been a long night, and she was very tired—but exultant.

When Brock made his way to Sir George's room, Mrs. Bolt was waiting for him outside in the passage.

"She's a lovely girl, sir. You must be very proud of her, I'm sure. But when you tell the master—you will be very cautious what you say, won't you? For he had set his heart on it being a boy."

"I'll try to be as tactful as I can, ma'am, but Sir George has to be told the truth, sooner or later."

Dawn was lighting up the sky when Mrs. Bolt showed Brock into the great bedchamber, and as she rattled the curtain rings along the rail, flooding the room with the first rays of sunshine, the old gentleman rolled over in his bed, snuffling and grunting.

"Good morning, Sir George," Mrs. Bolt said primly. "I hope you slept well."

"Heh? What? Oh, it's you, Emmy. Come here, my dear, and give me—"

Sir George put out a sleepy hand, without opening his eyes, and Mrs. Bolt broke in hastily: "I'll bring you your morning tay in a few moments, sir, but first of all, you have a visitor. The major-general is here to see you."

"What's that? Savage? What the deuce does he want at this hour of the day?"

The old man struggled to sit up, and Mrs. Bolt straightened his pillows, plumping them up behind him.

"Good morning, sir. I'm sorry to intrude upon you so early," began Brock.

"Has something happened? What's amiss?" Sir

George rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with bony knuckles, then suddenly flashed a grin. "Damme—I'll wager I can guess what you've come to tell me. Garnet's done her duty, heh? She's made a grandfather of me. That's the truth of it, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir, you're quite right. The baby was born, safe and well, in the small hours of this morning."

"You must be a happy man too, I'm sure! That's capital news, capital. Emmy—Mrs. Bolt, I should say—go and fetch a bottle of the finest old brandy, so we can wet the baby's head. . . . Don't stand there gawping, woman—be off with you!"

"Brandy—before breakfast, sir? Whatever will the doctor say?" the housekeeper protested.

"Damn the doctor's eyes. He don't know everything, and this is a special occasion. Fetch the bottle, and three glasses—you shall join us in our toast to the newcomer. . . . Run, woman—run!"

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Bolt anxiously, and added to Brock as she left the room, "You'll remember what I said, won't you, sir?"

Brock nodded, but it was not going to be easy to get any information through to the old gentleman in his present state.

With his face as red as a turkeycock, Sir George was chuckling and wheezing breathlessly, and punching the bedclothes with his fist.

"Come closer, Savage. Come and let me shake you by the hand, for you've made me a happy man this day . . . you and that amazing girl of mine. . . . I congratulate you, sir—with all my heart." He pumped Brock's hand energetically, and continued.

"What are you going to call the young man? Have you picked a name for him yet? I suppose I'm partial, but I must own I have always considered George to be a very good name—very suitable for a military man. . . . George Mallory Savage—what d'ye say to that?"

OLD WORLD

Brock sat upon the edge of the bed, choosing his words carefully.

"Let me ask you a question, sir. You referred a moment ago to your amazing girl. . . . You're proud of Garnet, are you not?"

"You know I am—why shouldn't I be? She's done well, giving birth to a lad who'll keep up the family tradition."

"Not exactly that, sir. Though perhaps the tradition may be continued in other ways," said Brock.

"I don't understand you, Savage. What are you saying?"

"Suppose instead that the Mallory tradition were to be followed by another girl, as amazing and splendid as Garnet herself?"

There was a long moment of silence. A bird flew up at the window with a whirring of wings, and disappeared. Brock heard the clock ticking on the overmantel. At last Sir George spoke—almost in a whisper.

"What are you trying to tell me, man?"

"Would it be such a disappointment, after all, to know that Garnet had presented you with a new member of the family—who takes after her mother?"

"A girl . . ."

The old man's voice was dead, completely without expression. Then, with a great effort, he repeated the words, as if they were a curse.

"A girl . . ."

And as Brock turned to him, he saw Sir George's face contort with grief—grief, anger, and some other emotion he could not identify. The old man clenched his fists; the veins stood out upon his forehead like twisted tendrils, and his whole complexion was suffused. From being red, it purpled and darkened. He seemed to gasp for air; his mouth fell open, and a dribble of saliva trickled down his chin.

Brock moved forward instinctively to go to his as-

sistance, but Sir George raised one shaking hand to ward him off.

"A girl . . ." He mouthed the words for the last time, and his lips and tongue wrestled awkwardly with the sounds; they merged into a long, inarticulate moan.

As Brock watched helplessly, the old man's face twisted into the grotesque caricature of a mirthless smile, and he began to slump over, toward the wall.

The door opened at this instant, and Mrs. Bolt returned with a tray, bearing a bottle and three glasses. She stopped, frozen, upon seeing her employer, and gave a little cry.

"Brandy, Emmy . . . *brandy!*"

Sir George forced out the words with enormous difficulty and then fell sideways, in an apoplexy. Mrs. Bolt thrust the tray into Brock's hands, and rushed to the old man's side, gasping: "I did warn you, sir. . . . The doctor—go fetch a doctor . . ."

The verdict was only too obvious; and the doctor soon confirmed that Sir George's already feeble constitution had suffered a second stroke. For some time, the old man lay in a semiconscious state, hanging between life and death, while Mrs. Bolt did all she could to nurse him back to health.

Inevitably, the news cast a shadow over the household, and threw the natural joy of Brock and Garnet into eclipse.

"It's frightening, isn't it?" Garnet asked the following afternoon, as she and Brock took tea together and waited for a bulletin from the sickroom. "Life is so haphazard. Ivory is born—Papa lies at death's door. At each moment, any one of us could be called to judgment. We are all in God's hands."

She looked across at the nearby cot, where the baby slept peacefully, and her face softened, but the somber look never left her eyes.

"Upon one thing, I am quite determined," she concluded. "As soon as possible, we must arrange the

OLD WORLD

christening. Papa's illness has taught me that we must never, never take chances. Brock, please see the vicar at the first possible moment, and tell him there must be no delay."

So Brock obeyed, and the ceremony was organized. The baby was baptised in the name of Ivory Amelia Savage (Amelia, after Garnet's own mother) at the parish church in Guildford, upon the following Sunday afternoon.

It was not a festive occasion, and there was to be no sociable gathering afterward; the handsome old church was almost deserted, except for the vicar, the two parents, and a middle-aged couple—friends of the Mallory family, from a neighboring estate—who had agreed to be pressed into service as godparents.

As the carriage rolled home to Rosewood, Garnet nursed the newly christened Ivory Amelia, and said rather sadly to Brock: "Isn't it a shame that Gerard is so far away, in America, with—what did you say her name is?—Clover, was that it?"

"Coral . . . I daresay they're married by this time, and settled down out there."

"Yes. But I wish they could have been here today. I would have liked Gerard to be Ivory's godfather."

"I doubt that your brother's arrival would do anything to help matters; his presence would probably aggravate your father's condition, by all accounts."

"That's true. Papa seems to have turned against Gerard completely. And yet I can't help feeling—if only they could meet again, there should be some way of reconciling them."

The carriage drew up with a clatter of hooves upon the gravel drive, and Brock helped his wife to alight. She took great care, holding the baby securely in the crook of her arm. As they started up the steps into the house, the front doors opened slowly and Mrs. Bolt came out to meet them. One look at her tear-stained face told them everything. Blindly, she mopped her eyes, and sobbed.

"Oh, Miss Garnet dear—Madam—your blessed father . . . He's gone. Ten minutes after you set off for church he had one last attack, and he passed away as I held him in my arms, before the doctor could get here."

So there was never to be any possibility of a reconciliation between father and son, after all. Sir George had departed, and by the terms of his last will and testament, the entire estate now passed into Garnet's hands.

It was faintly unpleasant, and a little uncanny, to return so soon to the church that had been the scene of Ivory's christening, upon the occasion of Sir George Mallory's funeral.

But this was a very different affair. The old gentleman had been widely known and respected—if not generally loved—in the district, and the county turned out in force to pay its last respects. A crowd of nearly a hundred people made their way to the cemetery and followed the coffin to its final resting place. Afterward, Garnet had to receive a host of callers at Rosewood, all anxious to get a sight of the inside of the house and a glimpse of the new baby. Or, for that matter, the new husband, since Brock had not mingled with the local gentry since his return from America. He was not an excessively sociable man at the best of times.

And these were not the best of times.

The weeks that followed Sir George's funeral seemed to pass in an unhappy trance for Brock. He spent more and more time alone, in a little room that Garnet had converted into his personal den—a study where he could keep his military souvenirs, his maps, his books on the strategy of warfare, his uniform . . .

Gradually, he withdrew from the rest of the household and became almost a recluse, busying himself with books and papers, following the progress of international affairs, and only seeing his wife each morning and night and at mealtimes.

OLD WORLD

"What are you doing today, my dearest?" Garnet asked him, over breakfast.

"I haven't quite decided. What shall *you* do?" he countered.

"Oh, I have a million things to do. I shall be *very* busy," she replied, buttering a finger of toast, and dipping it into her boiled egg. "To begin with, I must feed Ivory, and bathe and dress her. . . . Then I shall meet Mrs. Bolt to discuss the housekeeping and order the meals. At ten, I have to see the estate manager, and find out what he plans to do with the home farm this year, and at eleven I must take Ivory out for her morning promenade. This afternoon, I have promised to see the head groom—he wants permission to buy some new horses—and after that I must go in to Guildford on business. It seems that poor Papa was not very good at organizing his finances. We have a great many creditors with bills waiting to be met, and they must all be satisfied. I have an appointment with our lawyer, Mr. Marple, at his office. But perhaps you would care to accompany me, dearest? After all, it's as much your concern as it is mine."

"Oh, no—I think not. The estate is yours; you must manage it as you think best. No, I shall stay here and work—in my study," said Brock.

"Oh . . . very well. If that is what you prefer," she said quietly.

Her days were so very full—with the household business and estate management, not to mention the endless hours she devoted to little Ivory; bathing her, dressing her, changing her, airing her, and loving her. And Brock's days were so very empty.

He felt that they were being slowly but surely dragged apart. He was aware of the change that had come into their lives, and he feared and dreaded it—but what could he do about it?

Oh, yes, he might have shared some of Garnet's burdens; he could have interviewed stable hands and farmers on her behalf. He could have paid the bills

with her money, or drawn up agreements with her lawyer, which Garnet could later have signed. But he could not bring himself to do that.

When he met and loved and married Garnet, he had had no thought of her position in life; she had none, then. This new responsibility that had fallen to her lot was an unforeseen development. He was not content to sit by, as the consort of a rich young woman and help her to manage her money. He was a fighting man, with his own work to do.

If only someone would give him the chance.

Each day, he snatched the morning newspaper as soon as it arrived and took it off to his den, studying the latest intelligence—and praying that he might soon be plunged into the world's affairs once more.

"What's the matter with me, in heaven's name?"

He stood in the little study, and stared at his reflection in the glass. A middle-aged man stared back at him: a man with hair that was turning gray, with clear blue eyes shadowed with doubt and bewilderment, a man lined by cares and anxieties, old before his time. The scar upon his temple seemed still to be raw and ugly, and the pain beneath it cut him like a knife.

He picked up the newspaper again.

Since the banishment of Napoleon Bonaparte to Elba, it had appeared that peace was about to return to Europe, and yet that peace had been short-lived. At about the same time that Brock sailed home from America, Napoleon, in a last daring coup, had made his escape from exile, and returned to France. Louis XVIII was forced to flee to Belgium, and the Emperor took up his old place at the heart of the nation once more.

This time Napoleon was determined upon victory. He rallied his people immediately and took the offensive, launching a campaign against the armies of Britain and Germany, throwing his invincible soldiers

OLD WORLD

against the troops of Wellington and Blücher on the Belgian frontier.

A full-scale battle was about to be waged, and Brock would have sold his soul to be there, in the thick of it. But the call he awaited daily never came.

Perhaps he had been too outspoken during the scorching of Washington, when he had made no secret of his opinions regarding the strategy of his superior officers? And at New Orleans—although he liked and admired Sir Edward Pakenham—Brock had known from the outset that they were fighting for a lost cause. Perhaps some unfavorable reports had got back to the War Office, and this was the reason he was being left now to cool his heels in enforced retirement?

One thing he had inherited from Sir George, by default, was his cellar of fine wines and excellent brandies, for Garnet never indulged in such liquors and left them at Brock's disposal entirely.

He tossed aside the newssheet, and moved across to a cabinet, where he kept a bottle and a glass. His head was throbbing. He poured himself a generous measure of brandy, and drank. Then he sat with his back to the window, cradling the glass between his hands, as he thought about the old days.

He let his mind wander back to earlier times, when he had set off with his hopes high, en route for other theatres of war . . . Corunna . . . Lisbon . . . Vitoria . . . He remembered the night they left Southampton on the voyage to Portugal, aboard the *Ariadne*. Before they sailed, he was busy ashore in an empty warehouse that had been commandeered as temporary stabling for the regiment.

The first time he had ever seen Garnet, he had been shoeing his black stallion, by the red glow of the furnace. He looked up, interrupted at his task, stripped to the waist, sweating and shining from his exertions, and saw her standing there, fearful, at the edge of the shadows. Only he had not known at first

ROSEWOOD

that Garnet was a girl, for she had been dressed in the ensign's uniform she was to wear throughout the Peninsular campaign.

Their exchange had been brief. The "boy" seemed timid and tongue-tied. Brock asked his name, and discovered that he was to serve in his own regiment, the Third Dragoon Guards. He told Garnet to take a good look at him and remember him when they met again, for he was the commanding officer.

Then, in a swift, unexpected movement he had put his hand to the lad's face and tilted his chin, correcting his posture.

"Head up, shoulders back. Learn to stand straight, boy . . ."

That was the moment of revelation, when he had touched Garnet's smooth cheek and felt such a tingle of physical excitement within him that he had feared he was losing his reason. Could he have desired this pale slim youth whose voice had not yet broken, this child, snatched so newly from his mother's apron-strings—this *boy*?

Later that night, when the *Ariadne* was far out at sea, heading for the Bay of Biscay, they met once more upon the deck. It was dark, and there was no one else about, but Brock had recognized Garnet instantly in the faint, glow-worm light of the stars overhead: and they spoke again.

Their talk was nothing; he asked if Ensign Mallory was feeling queasy with the motion of the vessel—or if he yet suffered from another kind of sickness, missing his home and family. How long had he been away from them? The words did not matter; Brock was seeking to assure himself of something else, something far more important and more troubling. He nerved himself at one moment to touch the boy's face once more, repeating the same brusque gesture, to find out if it evoked the same startling response—

And it did; but with ten times the force. An electric shock seemed to spread from his fingertips to the very

OLD WORLD

center of his being—to the root of his manhood. His blood pounded, and he felt the tide of passion racing within him. In that instant, he knew without any doubt that Ensign Garnet Mallory was no boy, but a young woman on the threshold of her life; and he knew too that he would love her till the day he died.

So it had all begun that night, less than four years ago; and now as Brock stared blindly down into the brandy glass, and let the fumes coil through his brain, he wondered how it could end . . . Would he ever be a man again, doing a man's work, and leading a man's life? The ache in his head was like a steel nail, driven in relentlessly; he took another swig of brandy, and closed his eyes.

Some time in the late afternoon, the servants' hall was alerted by an insistent ringing. It was the bell in the major-general's study. One of the housemaids was dispatched to answer the summons, and Lucy Ashe—pretty, pert Lucy, trying to push her unruly ringlets back under her mobcap—hurried breathlessly to see what the new master wanted.

She entered the room, and hesitated uncertainly. "Yes, sir?" she began. "You rang?"

The figure seated with his back to the window raised his massive, leonine head and stared at her. He was silhouetted against the light, but she could see that he was partly undressed, his tunic unbuttoned, his shirt open to the waist and one military boot half off.

"Who are you?" Brock asked, in a thick, growling tone.

"Lucy, sir. Did you want something?"

"I wanted assistance . . . I was in the middle of dressing—putting on my uniform—and I had some trouble with this damn boot. Can't get the wretched thing on or off. Send one of the men to help me, will you?"

She saw the empty bottle beside him, and she knew from the slurring of his words what was wrong.

ROSEWOOD

Summoning her courage, she approached and said, "I beg pardon, sir, but the men are all out in the fields at this time of day. Can I oblige you, p'raps?"

He looked her over dispassionately, and grimaced.

"Very well . . . you can try. I hope you've good strong muscles, Lucy, for you'll find it a hard exercise."

Brock stretched out his leg. He had been trying to get the boot on but his fuddled state had made him clumsy, and he had twisted the close-fitting leather so that it was jammed over his ankle. Lucy tried to pull it free, but she could not move it.

"No, no, girl—not like that—you'll never shift it that way. Take my foot between your legs. Have you never watched the stable lads pulling off a pair of riding boots? . . . Like so—!"

Brock turned Lucy around so that her back was toward him, and thrust his foot between her legs.

"Take a firm grip and try again," he muttered. "And try *harder!*"

She did her best to obey, lifting Brock's calf between her knees and then higher yet, until she had wedged his leg between her thighs, and she struggled with the obstinate boot once again.

Still it would not budge; but the tight proximity of their limbs was having a marked effect upon Brock, and she could hear him beginning to breathe a little faster.

"It's your confounded petticoats—in the way—" He jerked out the words abruptly, shifting his leg and feeling the confusion of her garments tangled about it.

"That's easy dealt with," she retorted with a smile, and she bunched up her skirts in either hand and hoisted them high, so that his bare flesh was pressed between her naked thighs. Still she guided his foot higher, and he felt the soft, downy warmth of her against his skin . . .

"Ah! I think it's shifting now—" she gasped, work-

ing energetically at the boot. "Yes, we're getting to grips with it, sir—don't you worry! It's coming off—it's coming—"

With a sudden spasm, his leg jerked, almost throwing her off balance, as the boot came free and flew off into the corner of the room.

"*That's better . . .*" she said quietly—but she did not move.

There was a long pause, during which neither of them spoke. The only sound was their quick, excited breathing.

"Thank you," he said at last. "You may go now, Lucy."

He lowered his leg, so that she could step away from him. She turned, adjusting her skirts, and eyed him speculatively, a dimple flashing at the corner of her lips.

"P'raps you'd like me to go on helping you to undress, sir?" she asked. "You look as if you might be ready for bed."

He lay sprawled back in his chair, his legs spread wide, and his military breeches straining tight across his loins. Greatly daring, Lucy let one hand drop lightly onto his open shirt, her fingertips brushing the curls upon his chest. Idly, she traced a course down the line of hair to his navel and below, where his belt was unbuckled and the top button of his breeches undone.

"I said—you *may go*," he repeated, in a voice like ice.

"Very good, sir. When the mistress returns from Guildford, shall I tell her you wish to see her?" Lucy asked, impudently.

"On no account. Tell your mistress that I do not wish to be disturbed. . . . Tell her that most particularly. I would not want my wife to see me—like this."

Lucy bobbed a curtsey and left the room; Brock relapsed into his own overheated, unhappy thoughts.

When Garnet returned from her afternoon's ex-

pedition into town, Lucy was quick to give her a carefully edited version of the incident

"Master's in his army uniform, Miss Garnet—Madam, I should say—and he's feeling very down in the dumps. I had to help him off with his boots, and then he sent me away. He's got through the best part of a bottle of brandy today, all on his own, and he said most particular that he didn't want to be disturbed, not even by you, Miss. . . . *Specially* not you, he said."

"I see . . . thank you, Lucy. Then you may go and see to baby, while I change my clothes. I'll call you when I want you."

Garnet hurried upstairs to her own boudoir, her mind racing.

She knew only too well what a torment it was for Brock waiting for that official summons, day after day, feeling old and useless and unwanted. And she knew too of the frustration that had built up inside him, during the long weeks of her confinement. Small wonder that he had sent a message to her, requesting her to stay away from him. She had been of little service to him as a wife, recently. She imagined him sitting alone in the study in his old uniform, and her heart went out to him.

Suddenly, she had an idea; and when she reached her boudoir, she began to fling off her clothes impatiently. When she was quite nude, she opened the closet, and pulled out a battered wooden trunk, a military chest that contained all the souvenirs she had brought home after her travels to Spain and America. Swiftly, she threw back the lid and began to unpack the contents.

Ten minutes later, Brock roused himself at the sound of a knock upon the door. "Who's there?" he asked, dully.

"It's me," replied Garnet, and her voice trembled as she spoke.

Brock frowned, and shook his head. "I sent a mes-

OLD WORLD

sage . . . I told them to say I didn't want my wife to see me like this."

"This isn't your wife, sir. It's your aide-de-camp."

The door swung open, and Garnet stepped into the room. Brock looked at her as if she were a figure from another world, and stumbled to his feet.

"Ensign Garnet Mallory, sir, reporting for duty."

Her long hair had been concealed beneath her old shako, her feminine curves encased within the familiar scarlet jacket and white sash, her legs hidden under white buckskins.

"Dear God . . ." He brushed a hand across his eyes. "Garnet, is it really you?"

"At your service, sir—always," she said.

They stepped across the floor to meet one another as if in a dream; he put out his arms, and she moved into his embrace. He held her close; he did not kiss her. He was too conscious of his sweaty body and the liquor on his breath—but she was heedless of everything except her love for him.

Slowly he became aware that she was easing him out of his jacket, drawing the shirt from his arms, unfastening his breeches—and as if in automatic response, he followed each move she made. As she undressed him, so he too divested her of her masculine attire, piece by piece.

He took off her military shako and watched with a kind of joyous wonder as her chestnut hair, suddenly released, tumbled about her shoulders, those smooth, silken shoulders, uncovered as he removed her jacket and her shirt. His hands found their way to her belt, pulled it free, then let her breeches fall, and followed their descent with his fingertips, tracing the lovely course of her satin hips—and the warm velvety cleft in between . . .

Naked, they came together. There were no words, for nothing needed to be said. They had been far apart, and they had found one another again. With their arms entwined about each other, they sank

slowly to the study floor, and there—upon the worn turkey carpet—they were reunited.

It was a turning point in their lives, and perhaps a good omen, for the next morning, when the sun arose and they awakened in their four-poster bed, still locked in each other's arms, they listened to the chorus of birds outside the window, hailing the new day and the sound of their baby daughter calling to be fed—and they smiled with contentment.

It was Mrs. Bolt who brought them their early morning tea, and today, as she set the tray down by the bedside, she fumbled in the pocket of her apron.

"Oh—and there's a special messenger come from London with a letter for you, sir. . . . He said as how I was to give you this first thing when you woke. It's very important, seemingly."

Brock took the envelope, cracked the sealing wax that fastened it and tore it open.

"It's from the War Office . . ." He told Garnet—and she held her breath.

"Well?" she asked, as he took in the contents at a glance.

"It's come at last," he said. "I've been recalled to arms. I'm to prepare to rejoin the regiment in Belgium at once. . . . Wellington has asked for me."

"Oh, Brock—I'm so glad for you!" Garnet threw her arms around her husband and hugged him, heedless of Mrs. Bolt's presence. "Of course we shall miss you sadly when you go, but I do understand—"

"Miss me? In heaven's name, wife—you don't suppose that I'd sail off to foreign parts and leave you and Ivory behind, do you? You're both coming with me!"

"Ivory and me? But—but—" Garnet felt she would burst with happiness, though she stammered out: "But there's so much to be done here, looking after the house, the farm—"

"I'm quite sure the farm can look after itself for a while, ma'am," said Mrs. Bolt, wreathed in smiles.

OLD WORLD

"And I promise you I can take care of the household till you get back."

"You see?" Brock laughed with delight and embraced his wife again. "You must start packing right away, Mrs. Savage, for we sail from Dover on Monday next."

"And you're really sure you want me to come with you?" Garnet asked.

"I insist upon it," he replied. "I'm not going to risk being parted from you again!"

Chapter Three

REVELRY BY NIGHT

Packing and preparations for the journey occupied the whole of that day, and the next. There would have been luggage enough if Brock were traveling alone, but since his wife and daughter were to accompany him, the stack of trunks, portmanteaux, bags and baggage in the hall mounted hour by hour.

"Boots—bathtubs—biscuits—bed linen—" Brock ticked the items off on a list with an air of comic desperation. "Is there no end to it? We'll need an entire wagon train to accompany us at this rate!"

"And we must organize some of the servants to go with us," Garnet reminded him. "One of the grooms, perhaps, who can look to the horses and act as your batman. And a ladies' maid to help me with the baby. I thought possibly Lucy Ashe would be most suitable—"

But on this point Brock stood firm. "No. Not Lucy. Not any of them," he announced. "The servants can do their part by loading the carriage and sending us off on our way—but when we reach the coach, once the gear is stowed safely on board ship, I shall pack the coachman off, to return home. We can pick up more staff when we arrive in Belgium; I shall have all the men I require to wait on me, once I rejoin my regiment. If you need a maid, I'm sure we can find some willing young mademoiselle over there."

"A foreign girl? Oh, but Brock—surely—"

"Why not? There's no sense in taking an English wench who can't make herself understood. Besides,

we'll travel faster if we're not part of a company. And I want to have you all to myself—for as long as possible."

There was no argument after that.

At last the little expedition was ready to set off. Mrs. Bolt stood at the top of the steps below the front portico, waving her handkerchief until the carriage was out of sight; and their journey had begun.

The first stage, which took them as far as Dover, was uneventful. The weather was fair and warm; haymaking was in progress in the farmlands along the road, and it was hard to believe that just across the sea, a bloody battle was about to take place.

At Dover, all was hustle and bustle; many other officers had been summoned back to service, and every available regiment was being dispatched to the theatre of war. All the larger vessels in the port had already been commandeered as troop transports.

"Don't be anxious, my darling; I shall find a way to take you across the Channel—even if I have to swim for it, with you and Ivory upon my back!" Brock assured Garnet. After a few hours and several fruitless negotiations, Brock found what he was looking for; a little sloop, crewed entirely by an old fisherman and his son. He fixed a price for the voyage, and their luggage was soon disposed below decks.

There was only one cabin, and Brock warned Garnet that she would have to be content with a fairly primitive form of accommodation. That night they set sail for the coast of Belgium, upon the turn of the tide; and once the light of Dover had been left behind, Brock went below to join his wife in the cramped cabin.

"It's hardly luxurious, but it will serve us well enough," he began.

Garnet silenced him, her finger to her lips. She had just given Ivory her last feed of the day, and the baby was snuggling down to sleep in a little wicker basket which did duty as a crib by night.

Brock understood and nodded. He gestured wryly toward the bunk; there was only one, a narrow, plank bed with an apology for a mattress upon it, squeezed against the wall. Garnet smiled back at him, her eyes dancing. Still without speaking, in order not to disturb the child, she began to undress, and Brock followed suit.

There was something strangely exciting about the slow deliberation of their movements as they passed and repassed one another in that tiny space, removing their clothes carefully and cautiously, brushing against one another accidentally—although sometimes, perhaps, it was no accident. The back of a wrist upon a lacy underskirt, the tingle of a fingertip trailing across a breast. The last garments were quietly removed, and then Garnet's hip brushed, fleetingly, the rough, springing hair of Brock's thighs, and she felt the quick throb of his masculinity hard against her.

He extinguished the single candle, and—still without a sound—they slid into the narrow bed, and lay pressed together, their limbs interlocked, for there was no room for them to take any other posture.

They did not need words, for each knew what was in the other's mind. This was the first time they had been in a ship at sea since the voyage home from America, when they were first married. It was, in a very real sense, a second honeymoon.

Garnet lay back, not even noticing the thin, lumpy palliasse beneath her, unfolding herself to Brock's love with eagerness and delight. He took her gently, and then, as his ardor increased, his mounting passion drove him on with stronger and stronger thrusts of his powerful loins, each movement increasing her rapture and leading her to new revelations of joy.

Still they were silent, but for the rapid crescendo of their breathing, and then—at the very moment of their climax—a quiet, wordless sound of satisfaction sprang from Garnet's heart, a sound that Brock muf-

OLD WORLD

fled instantly by stopping her mouth with his own in a kiss that seemed as if it would last forever . . .

Dawn broke over the flat skyline of Ostend, and the boat's two-man crew assisted their passengers to disembark. Garnet and Ivory waited, perched on a wooden chest at the quayside, until Brock found another diligence to take them farther upon their journey.

His instructions were to report to British headquarters in Ghent, the temporary court of the French king, Louis XVIII. The long, straight roads so typical of the Low Countries led them on by vast meadows and canals and long lines of poplars that stabbed the plain like upraised, warning fingers. They passed through Bruges, a fairy tale of sloping roofs and dreaming towers reflected in a maze of waterways, and so on, at last, to Ghent itself and the French court.

But there were no British troops waiting to greet them: only a petty functionary with a greasy wig, who doled out a few words in broken English and scratched his nose with a grubby, gloved hand.

" . . . English soldier—all gone—to fight. You go too—find them at Brussels, I think . . . "

As far as Brock could ascertain, he had missed the main body of the British army by only a few hours. Napoleon was striking at the Belgian frontier, away to the southeast, and appeared to have the capital city as his target. So they boarded the little carriage again and proceeded along the dull, unbroken road that stretched to the horizon, signposted "Bruxelles."

When they arrived, Brussels presented an amazing contrast, a scene of vivacity and gaiety. The old city was one of the most fashionable capitals in all Europe, and the mere threat of a French invasion a few miles away did nothing to deter the inhabitants from their pursuit of pleasure.

There were theatres, cafes, restaurants on all sides and gaudy street markets and elegant, tree-lined

avenues. The stalls of flowersellers in the Grand' Place were like a living bouquet of color and perfume and only a few yards away, Garnet suddenly found herself confronted by Brussels' oldest inhabitant, the "Mannekin Pis"—a chubby, shameless toddler, who stood with his sturdy stone legs apart, endlessly making water into a fountain basin, to the amusement of the passersby.

Brock cocked an eye at his wife, who smiled and bit her lip, saying, "Now I know we are abroad. They would never permit such a thing in Guildford!"

Within half an hour, they had unpacked all their belongings once more, at a small hotel just off the Grand' Place, the Cheval Blanc, and Brock helped his wife to settle herself comfortably in a pair of connecting rooms—one, overlooking the courtyard, to be their bedchamber, and the other, originally intended as a dressingroom, to serve as a nursery for Ivory.

"Do you think you will be happy here?" Brock asked, as Garnet unpacked her belongings, hanging up her dresses in the heavy, old-fashioned closet.

"I'm sure we shall," she replied easily. "Why not? It's at the back of the building. We should not be disturbed by traffic."

"That is not quite what I meant. Do you think *you* will be happy here—without me?" he asked again, and she turned and stared at him in dismay.

"You will not go off and leave us?"

"I must, my darling. As soon as I find myself a good, reliable horse, I shall ride off and present myself to the Duke, upon the battlefield. You must stay here till I return."

"But I *always* come with you! You know I'm not afraid—find me another horse and I'll keep up with you, I promise."

Brock shook his head, and indicated the wicker basket. "You have other responsibilities now, my love. I cannot risk your life, nor hers. Wait for me—be patient—I shall come to you as soon as I can." With

OLD WORLD

that, he kissed her and left the room briskly, to avoid any further argument.

Garnet's heart felt as heavy as lead. She sank to her heels beside the little crib, with the tears pricking at her eyelids.

It was true, of course. It would be madness to take their child any nearer to the battlefield. She *had* to stay here in safety, for Ivory's sake. And yet with every fiber of her body, Garnet longed to throw off her woman's wear and don her old uniform once again, to ride proudly out of the city and into battle, as her husband's aide-de-camp.

"But we must be good, my precious," she whispered, forcing a smile as she picked up the baby and held it to her breast. "We must be good and brave—and wait . . ."

After that, it was something of an anticlimax when a mere two hours later Garnet heard a familiar, hurrying step upon the stair, and Brock himself burst into the room once more.

"Damn these delays!" he exploded. "The town commander reports that the latest signal from the front orders us to stay here till further notice, cooling our heels. We are not to proceed until given authority to do so."

"But why?" Garnet asked, grateful for the unexpected reprieve, but sympathetic with her husband's frustration at the same time.

"According to rumor the enemy cavalry are threatening our lines of communication. The French are trying to cut off the Duke's main force by outflanking them at a place called Quatre Bras. . . . The devil of it is, if we ride out to join 'em, as I'd hoped, we could be putting our heads in a noose. So for the time being, my dearest girl, I have to be patient as well—just like you—and await further orders."

It was an uneasy time for both of them. Brock was preoccupied and taciturn, while Garnet watched her man fretting helplessly and shared his restlessness.

Then, as daylight faded at the bedroom window, Brock recollected himself and fumbled in his tunic pocket.

"Here . . . I almost forgot this. It may serve to pass the time tonight." He tossed a pasteboard card with gilt edges onto the table, and Garnet picked it up.

It was an invitation to a ball, a very grand ball, to be given that night under the patronage of a distinguished lady—a duchess, no less—at her mansion in the city. And the presence of Major-General and Mrs. Savage was earnestly requested.

"A ball? Oh, Brock, no—you'd hate it. I don't want to go."

"Why not? Half the chiefs of staff will be there with their womenfolk. It'll be a good opportunity for you to meet them, and for me to learn all I can about the latest intelligence from the front. Besides—it will do neither of us any good to stay cooped up in this little room, brooding over our troubles! Come, my love. Make yourself ready, and you'll outshine every other female in Brussels tonight, I promise you!"

Garnet sighed and smiled, and agreed to do her best. She knew that Brock was urging her to go out, in order to take her mind off her anxieties, but if a great many of the British officers at present quartered in Brussels were to be present, then perhaps it was right that Brock should be there.

Swiftly she undressed, took her best ballgown down from the closet, and began her toilette. . . . Brock went downstairs for a word with the manageress of the hotel, and returned shortly with a pleasant, plump chambermaid, who expressed her willingness to stay and keep a watchful eye upon the baby while her parents were out.

So it was that, dead on nine o'clock, as the bell towers of Brussels struck the hour, Brock escorted his wife into the great house where the ball was under way.

Garnet had never looked lovelier. She wore a silk

OLD WORLD

dress, in a deep shade of red with a hint of purple in it, and a pale gray stole embroidered with silver. A silver net caught up her hair, and the same glittering embroidery picked out her beaded reticule. As Brock looked at her, his head lifted proudly.

"You look like a queen, Madam," he said, as he squired her up the steps to the ballroom.

"My king of men . . ." Garnet smiled back at him, resplendent in his scarlet dress uniform with its brilliant gold braid.

The band struck up as they walked onto the dance floor, an assembly of musicians who were knowledgeable in all the latest airs. Brock put his hand upon Garnet's waist, and they swung away together in the quadrille.

My king of men . . . The words echoed in Garnet's brain. Suddenly she remembered, with a pang of guilt, the first time she had ever spoken that phrase . . . years ago, before she and Brock had even met, at the very first ball she ever attended, in Guildford. She had believed herself so desperately in love with another young officer—what was his name? She could scarcely remember for an instant—oh yes, Edmund Challoner. . . . Poor Edmund! She thought she loved him, but how could she have known what love was at that time? And to think that she had called Edmund "her king of men"!

The mere notion sent the blood to her cheeks, and Brock, admiring his beautiful young wife, saw her color heighten and the light sparkling in her eyes, and he was glad he had persuaded her to accompany him tonight.

But as soon as the dance was over, he disengaged himself.

"Forgive me, my darling, but I see old Carstairs over there, talking with the lieutenant-colonel. . . . I'd better go and make myself known to them. Can you amuse yourself for a few minutes?"

"Of course, Brock. I shall sit and watch the others,

and be very entertained. Don't concern yourself with me."

So Brock Savage took himself off for a discussion of the latest bulletins, and Garnet sat upon a sofa in a secluded alcove, and waited. And the minutes ticked away: ten—twenty—thirty . . .

At first it was amusing enough to be a spectator. Garnet compared this dazzling spectacle with the little unpretentious dance at the Borough Hall in Guildford, and smiled to herself. It had seemed so fine and splendid to her then; but of course it was completely outclassed by this display of wealth and elegance—the pillared dance floor, the ornate chandeliers, the swooping, swaying rhythms of the orchestra.

She watched the dancers as they whirled past her, and suddenly her attention was caught by one particular couple. The man was handsome, in a rather fleshy, obvious way. His hair was oiled and plastered in tight curls close to his head, and he sported a pair of bold moustachios.

But it was his partner who attracted Garnet's attention.

She was a little below medium height, with small, definite features and a hint of amusement in the curve of her red lips. Her hair, piled high in a chignon, was the color of ripe, golden corn, and her eyes were remarkable—palest gray, so light as to be almost transparent, under thick, black lashes and black brows, which contrasted very strikingly with her blonde hair.

And yet it was not the girl's appearance alone that arrested Garnet. It was something in her manner, in her bearing, in the way she looked at her dancing partner, and—just occasionally—allowed the tip of a pink tongue to moisten her lips. It was something in the fluid motion of her body, the almost catlike grace with which she moved to the music. It was something, above all else, that spoke with absolute clarity of physical excitement, of sensuality. Of sexual conquest.

OLD WORLD

Garnet could not stop looking at this magnetic young woman, and she watched her until her midnight blue dress was swallowed up in the throng. There was such a fascinating quality about her. Garnet laughed at herself for being so hypnotized, but it was true. . . . The strange young lady—whoever she was—had a kind of magic.

Still the time passed, and gradually Garnet began to feel a little bored by her own company. There was no sign of Brock, so she decided to take a turn through the house and out into the garden beyond. A breath of air would be very pleasant, for the heat of the ballroom was becoming not a little oppressive.

She wandered down the steps and through a series of arches, under a colonnade that opened on to the garden.

Outside the night air was blissfully cool; a gentle breeze sighed among the trees and stirred the foliage. Garnet thought of Guildford again. The best that the Borough Hall had to offer by way of a promenade was a little anteroom off the main assembly, where a few potted shrubs and leafy branches had been strung together to form a makeshift arbor.

Here the arbors were natural; a series of little lawns and flowerbeds connected by a spider's web of paths, each one sheltered from its neighbor by thick shrubbery and night-scented blossoms. The paths were partially lit by oil lamps flickering behind colored glass shades, but—whether by accident or design, Garnet could not decide—many of the lamps seemed to have been extinguished by now, and at certain points the garden was impenetrably dark.

Garnet walked on, aware of the presence of other people nearby; young couples entwined in the shadows. A silhouetted pair of lovers embracing beside a classical group of statuary, whose marble limbs seemed to mock the living flesh with their voluptuous excesses. A gypsy violinist with a scarf around his

head and one golden earring made his way from place to place, extemporizing a romantic serenade.

Garnet felt rather ill at ease, and began to wish she had not come out into the garden alone. If only Brock had been with her! She was about to turn back and reenter the house when she heard voices close at hand. A girl's voice, sharp and clear, protested in English:

"Stop—you must not—how dare you, m'sieur!"

Then a rapid torrent of French or Belgian, which Garnet could not follow, in a throaty male whisper. The words were lost in any case, for the man spoke so thickly and insistently that Garnet guessed he was half-drunk. But the meaning was clear enough. He was trying to cajole, to plead, to beg for the young Englishwoman's favors. And when she continued to deny him, he became importunate and began to exert force upon her.

"Let go of me, you devil—" the girl cried angrily.

Garnet stood undecided, the reluctant eavesdropper of this embarrassing tête-à-tête, and wondered what she should do. Peeping through the bushes, she could dimly make out the two figures, the man clawing at the girl's bosom, his hands feverishly trying to unfasten her corsage, as she struggled to defend herself. But in vain—for with a hideous rending sound, the bodice of the dress suddenly ripped completely down the front.

"You filthy pig!" exclaimed the girl, and lashed out at her attacker with all her might, shoving him aside and following this up with a well-placed kick. The man was intoxicated, and unsteady on his feet. He staggered back and fell heavily, leaving the way clear for his victim to make her escape. She ran from the shrubbery blindly—and found herself face to face with Garnet.

It was the blonde girl in the midnight-blue dress. But now her hair was in disarray, hanging down untidily, and her dress was cruelly damaged, the

OLD WORLD

jagged tear in the material leaving her breasts completely uncovered, her nipples erect and quivering.

Swiftly, Garnet took charge of the situation.

"Come, put my stole around you, and we'll go indoors," she said. "In the room where I left my cloak, I noticed an old woman who may have a needle and thread. . . . Don't be upset—everything will be all right."

They slipped back into the house and took refuge in the ladies' retiring room. Sure enough, the ancient dame in rusty black, who was keeping a drowsy supervision over the coats and cloaks of the guests, produced a needle and a spool of cotton, and Garnet began to perform a rough-and-ready repair upon the torn fabric.

As her fingers plied the needle deftly, the stranger watched her in silence for a while, recovering her composure. At last she said:

"Why are you taking all this trouble? We don't even know one another."

"That's easily remedied," said Garnet. "My name is Garnet. My husband is Major-General Broccard Savage. We've just arrived in Brussels, and are lodging at the Cheval Blanc while he awaits orders from his superior officers. Now tell me who you are, and we shall have introduced ourselves."

"Oh . . . I'm nobody, ma'am. Nobody of any consequence," said the girl, studying Garnet's face intently. "My name is Cassandra Mayne—*Miss Cassandra Mayne*—of nowhere in particular." A smile illuminated her pale gray eyes for a second as she added, "Known to my friends as Cassie . . . not that I have so very many!"

Garnet glanced up and returned her smile. "I find that hard to believe, somehow."

The situation had flung them headlong into an unexpected propinquity, with no time for shyness. Garnet found herself touching the softness of the stranger's breasts as she mended the bosom of her

ROSEWOOD

dress; and their faces were only a few inches apart. From being strangers, they had become intimate. To Garnet's surprise, this intimacy was in no way uncomfortable, but oddly reassuring.

"And how do you come to be in Brussels, Miss Mayne?"

"I have been working here as English governess to a Belgian family," she replied. "Monsieur et Madame Max, and their three hideous children."

"Oh—are they so very dreadful?" Garnet asked.

"Well . . . perhaps I am prejudiced. The man you saw me with—the man from whom you helped to rescue me—was M'sieur Max."

"Ah, the gentleman with the moustachios? I see. You are in a difficult situation, Miss Mayne."

"Indeed, ma'am, I think that is an understatement, if anything."

"There—that's finished. At least you are now able to face the world again without humiliation."

"You are very kind, ma'am. I hope perhaps tomorrow I may call upon you at your hotel, to offer thanks for your assistance at a more suitable hour."

"There's no need. But if you wish to call, I shall be happy to see you." Garnet moved away, to return the sewing materials to the old woman who was dozing in the corner of the room. "As I said, my husband may be recalled at any time. I am likely to be very glad of your company by tomorrow afternoon. . . . Why don't you come and take tea with me, Miss Mayne?"

The blonde girl stood up and stretched out her hand.

"Thank you again, ma'am. I should enjoy that above all things."

As they shook hands formally and parted, Garnet nodded and smiled, then left the cloakroom feeling rather pleased to have a lively new companion in this strange city.

It was only after she had returned to the ballroom to look for Brock that she missed her beaded reti-

cule. Immediately, she guessed what had happened; when she had gone to Miss Mayne's assistance in the garden and helped to cover her with the stole, she must have let the bag fall. Obviously, it would be still lying out there, somewhere in the shrubbery.

Reproaching herself for her carelessness, Garnet retraced her steps. Not that there was anything of value in the reticule, but it would be tiresome to lose it. She made her way back through the colonnade, and out into the garden once more.

It seemed, if anything, darker than ever. There were very few of the hanging lamps left alight by this time, and the shadows were very black indeed. Garnet tried to remember exactly where she and Miss Mayne had been standing and plunged into the labyrinth of little paths. But it was hopeless.

Five minutes later, she was forced to abandon the search; she would never find the reticule now.

It was while she was crossing the colonnade again that she saw a woman coming toward her, holding out a small bag that jingled and chinked as if it contained money. The woman was a total stranger—middle-aged, sour-faced and prim—but for a moment Garnet thought confusedly that she was being offered the bag by mistake.

"No thank you, that's not mine," she began.

The woman drew herself up and stared at her. "I do not understand," she said, with a pronounced foreign accent. "What are you saying? Where is Mees Mayne? She is with you, I think—just now?"

"Miss Mayne? Oh, yes, that's correct."

"You are a friend of hers? Another Engleesh woman, no?"

"Hardly a friend—an acquaintance, perhaps . . ."

At this point, Cassie Mayne's voice broke in, at Garnet's shoulder. "Good evening, Madame Max. Were you looking for me?"

"Ah!" The woman's face darkened, and the hard lines at the corners of her mouth deepened. "So. . . .

I wish you to know, Mees, that I have spoken with my husband. He has told me everything."

"Everything?" Cassie Mayne raised an eyebrow. "I'm afraid that would be impossible. M'sieur Max may be a clever man, but he doesn't know everything."

"Don't trifle with me, Mees! Here is your money. Now take yourself off, and consider yourself dismissed." And she flung the little bag contemptuously at Cassie's feet. It burst open, and several gold and silver coins rolled in all directions upon the marble floor.

There was a brief pause, during which the sound of the ringing money died away—and then Cassie dropped a deep, ironic curtsey.

"Thank you, Madame," she said. "Because you have now given me the opportunity to tell you what I think of you—and your precious husband—who has been trying to get his fat paws upon me from the first day I arrived under your roof!"

The Belgian woman drew back her arm sharply, poised to strike Cassie across the face. And then the situation changed again, within a split second. The blow never landed, and Cassie's comments had to remain unfinished.

A dull explosion rumbled through the house, followed by another, and yet another. It sounded like the approach of a thunderstorm, but they all knew immediately that this was no storm.

"*Mon dieu*," breathed Madame Max, frozen with shock. "The cannon! The French armies are upon us—!" She turned and ran off in search of her husband, picking up her skirts and tripping clumsily as she negotiated the staircase.

"Can it be?" Cassie turned to Garnet. "Was that really the French cannon?"

Garnet began to say that she knew no more than anyone else, and then she broke off, seeing Brock hurrying down the stairs toward her.

OLD WORLD

"Thank God I've found you—I've been looking everywhere," he began. "Did you hear the guns?"

"They say it's the enemy," Garnet looked at him beseechingly. "Is it true?"

"True enough. The French have passed the Sambre, and our left flank is already engaged. . . . I have been summoned to report for duty immediately. I must go now—this very minute."

"Oh, God." Garnet clung to him desperately; he kissed her once, and then held her at arms' length. They stared at one another with a kind of hunger, each knowing that this might be the last time that they would ever meet on earth.

"You must go, of course . . . I understand that. Don't worry about me," Garnet said at last. She squeezed his hand once more, then let him go. He took a deep breath.

"Of course I shall worry about you. You will never be out of my thoughts—you and the child." A new anxiety struck him. "How will you get back to the hotel tonight? Do you know which way to go?"

"There is no cause for alarm, sir," said Cassie Mayne, calmly. She had been upon her knees, retrieving the scattered money, and now she rose to her feet.

"I know my way about this city. I shall see that Mrs. Savage reaches her hotel safely. The Cheval Blanc, is it not? Very well, you need have no fear—I shall take good care of your wife."

Chapter Four

NOTHING BUT A PICNIC

"You are sure my presence does not embarrass you?" asked Cassie, an hour later.

"Of course not." Garnet raised her eyes from the child at her breast, and smiled. "If it did, I should have stayed in the other room to feed her. But it never even occurred to me."

"Perhaps you are accustomed to other women seeing you undressed," Cassie suggested, watching Garnet as she sat upon the end of the bed, nursing her baby.

Garnet had never presented a lovelier picture, even though she was *en deshabille*. The moment they returned to the Cheval Blanc, she had come straight to the bedroom, with Cassie close behind her, and relieved the little chambermaid from her watchful duty. Ivory had, it seemed, slept through most of the evening, but now showed signs of fretfulness.

"That's because she is hungry. This is the time when I generally feed her, before we settle down for the night," Garnet explained.

With that, she had lifted her daughter out of the crib, carried her to the big double bed and proceeded to unfasten her bodice. The tiny infant nuzzled her full, round breasts for a moment, then fastened upon one sweet nipple and began to feed contentedly.

Garnet sat back, lulled by the gentle rhythm of suckling, and considered Cassie's suggestion.

"No, not really," she said at last. "I have no sisters. My mother died when I was still very young. I

OLD WORLD

have not even made any close friends of other women. . . . So in fact I am seen like this by very few people, my husband and my daughter—nobody else."

"That's what I thought," said the governess. "And I am an only child myself, so I understand your feelings. If you would rather I left you alone until the baby has completed her midnight repast—"

"No! Please stay. I promise you, I am not in the least embarrassed," said Garnet. "In fact, it is rather pleasant to have someone to talk to at this hour of the night, since Brock has gone."

Her face clouded as she remembered her last sight of her husband springing into the saddle and riding off to war. And she wondered when she would see him again. She was glad she had not returned to the hotel alone, tormented by such thoughts.

"Besides," she continued, after a moment, "there is nowhere for you to go, Miss Mayne. If I understood your exchange with the Belgian lady correctly, you have been dismissed from your post with that family."

"Madame Max is a hysterical stupid woman. In her fit of bad temper, she completely overlooked the fact that my baggage—my clothes, all my worldly possessions, such as they are—still remain in a poky attic bedroom at her house. I shall have to call there tomorrow and collect them."

She sighed. It was not an agreeable prospect.

"But you will not return there tonight, I imagine?"

"No, indeed. I would prefer to walk the streets, rather than spend another night under that odious creature's roof!" Cassie stuck out her lower lip in comical defiance.

Garnet smiled again. "I don't think there is any necessity for you to do that. You are more than welcome to stay here, with me. I shall be happy to have your company during Brock's absence, for I don't know a soul in this city."

"Do you mean that? Could I possibly—" Cassie broke off, looking around. "But there is only one bed."

"It is wide enough to accommodate us both, surely? I don't kick—or snore, as far as I'm aware!—and if I talk in my sleep, you must dig me in the ribs and stop me."

"I might prefer to listen to your secrets!" Cassie flashed a sudden spark of amusement. "Who knows? They could be quite illuminating!"

Garnet laughed quietly, and rose to her feet, cuddling the baby.

"I'm afraid you would be sadly disappointed: I am a happily married woman with no secrets of any kind. Once in my younger days I might have surprised you, I confess, but not now."

"Your younger days?" Cassie watched her, her head on one side. "What nonsense! You're a child still, probably younger than I am myself, I suspect."

"I'm twenty-one," said Garnet, from the little dressing room, as she settled Ivory back into her basket for the night.

"I thought as much! And I'm—well, to be frank, I shall never see twenty-five again, alas!"

"Why, Miss Mayne, I had not realized you were such a prodigious age!" Garnet teased her, returning and shutting the door carefully behind her.

"Won't you call me Cassie? I should like to think that we are on terms of friendship, even after such a short acquaintance."

"Cassie. Yes, of course, and you shall call me Garnet. And now let us undress and get to bed, for this has been a long day, and I am rather tired."

By the light of the bedside candle, which sent gigantic shadows towering above them on walls and ceiling, the two girls began to disrobe. They talked casually as they did so, of this and that—the price of silk, the durability of cotton, the difficulty of keeping

OLD WORLD

one's apparel neat and clean while traveling. And all the time they cast sidelong glances at one another, comparing their ribbons and laces, their pins and brooches, the garments they unfastened and discarded, one by one.

Cassie Mayne was not wealthy, and had always worked hard for her living, but she had selected her wardrobe carefully; though she did not have a great deal of choice, her taste was good, and she had a shrewd eye for a bargain.

"That's a pretty cameo," Garnet commented at one point. "Is it a likeness of one of your relatives?"

"No, it was given to me by my previous employer, Lady Hartletop. I don't know its history. And this ring came from the Gaunt family—the Gaunts of Hertfordshire, you know. I have been fortunate; most of my trinkets came to me through the generosity of other people."

At last both girls were completely undressed. Then as Garnet was about to slip her nightgown over her head, she suddenly recalled that Cassie had no night attire to put on.

"What shall you do? I have a lace negligee that you are welcome to borrow, if you care to—"

"Thank you, but no. Lace is so scratchy, next to the skin. And my skin is uncommonly sensitive," Cassie replied. "Do you mind if I slip between the sheets just as I am, in a state of nature?"

Garnet turned to face her new companion, her nightgown still in her hands, and they gazed at one another.

Cassie was small, but her figure was perfectly proportioned. Her bosom was taut and firm; her nipples were darker than Garnet's pink rosebuds, being almost sepia in tone, but delicately modeled. Her narrow waist broadened to a gentle curve of belly and hip, and the curls shadowing the valley between her thighs were golden and lustrous.

"You're looking at my ridiculous birthmark," Cassie said, at last. "I know it disfigures me, but I can't help that."

"Birthmark? No—I hadn't even noticed."

Now Cassie had drawn her attention to it, Garnet couldn't help seeing the mark, just under her right breast. A trefoil shape—three tiny blood-red stains, joined at the center.

"And it is not in the least disfiguring. It looks like a cloverleaf—or a flower."

"A flower," Cassie repeated, and suddenly relaxed. "What a wonderful thing to say . . . No one ever told me that before."

(Much later, Garnet found herself wondering who *could* have told Cassie such a thing before, if she were an only child, and had lived such a sheltered life. But it was only a passing reflection, and she dismissed it.)

Impulsively, Cassie put out her hand and touched Garnet's arm. "I am so very glad that I have met you," she added. "I am sure we are going to be good friends."

When the light was out, and they lay side by side in the bed, under a huge, shapeless eiderdown of goose feathers, they went on talking, and Cassie made Garnet laugh with her acid comments on some of her previous employers.

"Poor Lady Hartletop . . . *so* good-natured, but *so* absent-minded. I declare, I saw her one morning at breakfast—with my own eyes, as they say, though I don't know what else one could see with—and she actually put up her face to kiss the butler instead of her husband. Though now I come to think of it, the butler was a very well-set-up young man, and Lord Hartletop did have a double chin and a squint. So perhaps she wasn't *quite* such a fool as we all supposed . . ."

Garnet chuckled, then remarked: "You seem to have had your share of eccentric employers. Mad-

ame Max was quite beside herself tonight, wasn't she? What had happened to put her in such a rage?"

"Oh, my dear Garnet, need you ask? You were there when it happened—when I was attacked by Monsieur Max, in the shrubbery."

"But why should the lady blame you for her husband's misconduct?"

"Isn't it obvious? Because I resisted his advances, he took his revenge by telling his wife *I* had made overtures to him. . . . Pah!—what a disgusting thought. I'd as soon pay court to a tub of lard!"

"But was it not the same gentleman I saw you dancing with some time earlier? You looked as if you were enjoying yourself then . . ."

"Oh, I was, but it was the music and the atmosphere I enjoyed—not my partner. I had to suffer him as a necessary but unfortunate appendage."

"I see. Surely it was a little strange of Monsieur Max to invite you to the ball in any case, since he was there with his wife?"

"He persuaded the dear lady that it was their Christian duty to provide some diversion for the poor English governess. It was an act of charity, you understand—totally unselfish on his part. But of course I knew better, since the brute had been ogling me ever since the day I arrived in Brussels."

Cassie's voice trailed off into silence.

She was remembering the first evening with the Belgian family when she unpacked in her attic bedroom and changed her gown before going down to dinner. She was dressed only in her petticoat, and it was while she was struggling to lift her valise up and put it on the top of the wardrobe that she had suddenly realized she was not alone.

He was standing in the doorway—she glimpsed him in the wardrobe mirror—a flashy, handsome man with curling black hair and the physique of a wrestler. And he was letting his glance roam over her

body with undisguised enjoyment. She turned, flustered at being caught unawares.

"Good evening—I mean *bon soir, m'sieur*."

He entered the room, and introduced himself. When they shook hands, he clasped her palm for a good deal longer than the conventional greeting, and she could feel that he was sweating. He apologized for intruding upon her when she was in a state of undress, but made no attempt to leave her to complete her toilette. Instead, he told her to carry on, and stood and watched her while she did so.

She lifted the valise again and tried to get it up to the wardrobe. He did not offer to help. It was a heavy case, and the wardrobe was a tall one. She struggled for a moment, her arms growing tired. Then she felt him approach. She could smell his cologne, and the smoke of his cigar, just behind her. She expected him to take the valise from her hands, but instead of that, he stroked her neck with his soft, damp fingertips.

Her petticoat was caught up upon her shoulders by two bows of ribbon—and to her dismay, he now seized upon these bows and pulled the ribbons free as she stood there—helpless under the weight of the valise, her arms stretched high above her head—and let the petticoat fall.

It slipped away from her in one swift movement; and she was wearing no undergarments. She heard a throaty purr of pleasure at her ear, and his arms closed about her like a trap, his hands cupping her breasts, as he pulled her to him. The velvet of his jacket, and the cruel imprint of steel buttons pressed against her back, and she felt his thighs grinding into her hips.

And—most of all—she felt an indescribable thrill of excitement, a blazing sensation that swept through her like a forest fire, starting at the pit of her stomach or deeper still, between her legs, then mounting quickly through her veins until it touched her brain

OLD WORLD

and exploded there in a dazzling sunburst of brilliance. A feeling of sensual satisfaction, of dizzy anticipation—but, most of all, a feeling of triumph.

She had this idiot totally in her power and she knew it!

"What fools men are, don't you agree?" she asked Garnet, and rolled over lazily in the double bed.

"Some may be. Not all, though," Garnet replied quietly.

"Well. You're prejudiced in favor of one man in particular," Cassie pointed out. "You're thinking of your husband."

As she spoke these words, another thunderclap of cannon rolled in upon the city, echoing and reechoing from several miles away.

"Yes . . ." Garnet's voice was very low, but very clear in the darkness of the bedroom. "Yes—I am thinking of my husband."

There was a pause.

"Don't be alarmed. He will come through this battle safely—I'm sure of it." Cassie felt for Garnet's hand and squeezed it tightly.

Garnet said nothing, but returned the pressure gratefully, and they lay together in silence until Cassie drifted off into sleep; but Garnet remained awake for a long time, staring into the blackness that surrounded her, a little comforted by Cassie's presence but wishing, above all, that she were with the man she loved.

When she awoke next morning, after a troubled, broken night, she was still thinking about him. She went to the window and looked out. It was a grim day, with black storm clouds gathering and a steady downpour of rain. Somewhere a bell was tolling, repeatedly.

Cassie stirred in bed, and opened an eye. "What's that noise? Church bells? Of course, it is Sunday morning."

"It's Sunday—but I think the bells are signaling danger," Garnet replied. "Come here—look at the people in the street."

Cassie climbed out of bed, and joined Garnet at the window.

Despite the filthy weather, the street was full already. There were people talking excitedly, running hither and thither—some shouting instructions to coachmen, others loading carts and carriages with boxes and baskets, provisions of all sorts, from sides of beef to loaves of bread.

"Where are they all going—on a picnic?" Cassie yawned. "It's hardly the ideal weather for that, to my mind."

"Brock told me yesterday that Napoleon used that selfsame word," Garnet replied.

"*Napoleon?* How does your husband know what the French tyrant said?"

"Oh, British intelligence is very thorough. We have spies in the enemy camp. . . . And apparently Bonaparte is reported to have said to his chiefs-of-staff, 'Gentlemen, I tell you Wellington is a bad general, the English are bad troops, and this affair is nothing but a picnic!' . . . At least, that is the story as I heard it."

"It may be true. They say he is very confident he will win." Cassie shivered a little. "I suppose that is why all these gallant heroes are packing their belongings into little carts. They are preparing to make their escape before the French army marches in to sack the city."

Garnet put her hand upon Cassie's shoulder, reassuringly. "It will never come to that. The British troops will not give way. . . . We've beaten Napoleon before, and we shall do it again—you wait and see."

Cassie tossed her head, and moved away from the window. "Oh, I'm not shaking with fear. I'm only shivering because it's a bleak morning. . . . I shall put on some clothes."

OLD WORLD

"And so shall I. Then I'll attend to Ivory, and we shall all go downstairs in search of breakfast."

The landlady of the hotel provided coffee and croissants, and told them that many of the citizens of Brussels were removing to Antwerp, where they hoped to be out of danger. Perhaps the visiting English ladies wished to follow their example?

"No—we shall stay here," said Garnet firmly. "My husband will be returning to join me, as soon as the battle is over. And I shall wait for him."

"Then I will keep you company," said Cassie, with equal determination.

The baby on Garnet's lap, not to be outdone, gave a sharp, defiant cry—and they all laughed.

A mere ten miles away, Brock Savage thought of his wife and daughter, but he was not laughing.

The weather was certainly appalling. It had rained hard all night, and the ground was almost a swamp. It was impossible even to light a fire, and the British troops, soaked to the skin, waited for the start of the battle with a kind of impatience. At least once the signal was given, they would be so occupied that there would be no time to feel cold and miserable.

Brock's regiment was ranged in line upon a gradual slope that commanded the plain. The visibility was poor, and he could scarcely see the enemy forces, assembling like slowly drifting thunderclouds on the opposite heights.

He remembered Garnet. What would she be doing now? He imagined her waiting, alone and afraid, at the Brussels hotel; and he cursed himself for having brought her so far from home.

A Sunday morning: if he had not disrupted her life, she would still be at Rosewood now—dressing, breakfasting, getting her prayerbook out to go to church in Guildford. How could he have been so rash—so foolhardy—as to bring his wife and child to the

ROSEWOOD

very edge of this battlefield? For if anything should happen to him in the next few hours—what in God's name would happen to *them*?

His thoughts were interrupted by a bugle call and cries of command. A little party of mounted officers cantered by; Brock recognized the Duke of Wellington's nutcracker profile, and as he passed he nodded curtly at Brock in recognition. The commander-in-chief was patrolling his forces, making certain that everything was in readiness for the imminent assault.

At ten o'clock, orders were passed down the ranks to all their troops, to clean their muskets and load them. A small allowance of rum was issued to every man, and then the regiments took up their classic pattern of defense, in hollow squares. When the French advanced, the British would be ready for them.

Some time between eleven and twelve, a cannon roared out from the gloom, and a flare of sulphurous light illuminated the far slopes for a moment. At once everyone was on the alert, as a cannonball whizzed through the sodden air like some venomous insect.

Then everything seemed to explode at once, and a shocking havoc commenced. The French set up a heavy bombardment, following it with four columns of infantry who advanced upon the British positions like a moving wall of steel.

This was no scientific battle, Brock realized bitterly. Strategy—subtlety—the arts of war—all these went unregarded. This was a stand-up fight between two old enemies, each one thumping the other like opponents in a fairground boxing-booth, slogging it out until one or the other should fall.

Wellington gave orders for his men to retrench and regroup, in order to present a more compact front to their adversaries. On the far side, Marshall Ney, thinking that the British were about to retreat, sent in wave upon wave of cavalry. But the Iron Duke was

OLD WORLD

ready for them, and horses and riders were soon sent spinning to their deaths in mud and blood, upon the field.

The smoke of the musketry thickened and blurred into the rain, until Brock could barely see a hundred yards before him. At moments, the carnage was almost completely obscured by this man-made fog, and it was only when weapons flashed fire that he could distinguish one side from the other.

In the blinding light of a cannonade, he saw the 5th Division—which had begun the day with a strength of 5,000 men—diminished to a last, straggling file, with their comrades lifeless around them.

Brock found himself thinking crazily: *What will happen if everyone is killed? Has there ever been a battle in which there were no survivors upon either side?*

It seemed, as he rode up to the front line, his horse bucking and rearing amid the shell and shot, that this was only too likely. Out of the smoke, a huge charger swerved to avoid him, and Brock recognized the rider—Wellington again, his jaw set, his eyes determined.

"Hard pounding, Savage—hard pounding," barked the Duke as he disappeared into the murk, "but we shall see who can pound the longest!"

In one last, desperate bid for victory, Napoleon ordered Marshal Ney to send in his crack regiment, the magnificent Imperial Guard, and at the height of the battle these matchless cavalymen thundered into action.

The British saw the foe rolling toward them like a floodtide, but they stuck to their guns—literally; and the French attack staggered, reeled and at last fell back in disarray.

At this moment, by God's grace, a sudden gust of wind lifted the clouds of fog and smoke, and for a few seconds the entire scene was revealed—the plain covered with the bodies of men and horses, and the

ROSEWOOD

unbeatable French guards retiring between the lines of British redcoats—beaten at last.

Such a shout of rejoicing went up from the British ranks that Brock felt a sudden sting of tears behind his eyes, and simultaneously he heard the Duke himself—that hoarse voice cutting through all other sounds—giving the command to charge. The counter-attack had begun, and Napoleon's final coup had ended in defeat.

"Get your men on the move, Savage!" the Duke shouted, as he rode by.

"At once, sir," called Brock, adding as an after-thought as he put spurs to his horse, "my lord—in which direction?"

"Why, forward, to be sure!" came the reply. "Right ahead!"

At this, the remaining troops in the British lines seemed to take new life, and they set off with vigor in pursuit of the enemy, leaving the dead and dying in sole possession of the battlefield.

The following day the news reached Brussels, and the bells pealed once more, but this time in triumph.

Garnet had been taking the air in the Grand' Place, with Ivory in her arms, when she first heard of the British victory, but as soon as she had assured herself that this was no idle rumor, she ran all the way back to the hotel and dashed up the stairs two at a time, to the bedroom.

Cassie was starting to unpack some of her bits and pieces, for she had by now managed to retrieve all her belongings from the Max household, when Garnet tumbled into the room, half-crying, half-laughing.

"What's the matter?" Cassie stared at her.

"I've just heard—the battle's over, and we've won!" Garnet exclaimed breathlessly. "Ivory darling, your Papa is a great soldier. He and the Duke of

OLD WORLD

Wellington have put paid to those Frenchies between them!"

She collapsed on the bed, hugging her baby daughter; and Cassie, a little more soberly, agreed it was indeed wonderful news.

"But what shall you do now?" she asked, after a moment. "How long will it be before your man comes back to find you?"

"I don't know." The light faded in Garnet's eyes, and she began to think more carefully. "It all depends where he is and what is required of him. As long as he's safe and well, he may very likely remain with the Duke, in charge of the next stage of the operation. But if not—"

She broke off, unable to face the unbearable alternative.

"Dear God . . . I never thought of that! Suppose something has happened to him."

Her face seemed to be suddenly blank and lifeless, as she continued: "I heard in the square a gentleman saying that the casualties had been hideous. . . . Ten thousand dead and wounded, in the space of two square miles, he said. And if Brock were among them?"

Abruptly, she stood up and methodically began attending to her child, putting a new shawl about her, tucking her carefully into her crib.

"We must not waste any time," she said. "Those bags you have been unpacking—you must fasten them again, Cassie—and I will pack my luggage, too. For we have a journey ahead of us."

She glanced down at Ivory's tiny, solemn features, and added, "Yes, you too, my little love . . . Thursday's child, with far to go . . ."

"A journey?" Cassie repeated. "I don't understand."

"I have to find Brock. I have to be sure he is alive and well. He could be lying on the field of battle at this very moment—wounded, dying. He may need help. We have to go to him."

"But that's impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible. The battle is over; the roads are open again. All we need is a horse and cart—and someone to drive it."

By midday they were ready to leave. Through the good offices of the landlady, Garnet had arranged to hire a small wagon, pulled by an elderly gray mare and driven by a burly—if not overintelligent—
young wagoner.

Garnet's knowledge of French was limited, but fortunately Cassie was fluent in the language, and between them they impressed upon the youngster that they wished to travel toward the scene of the recent fighting.

He seemed very reluctant at first and argued that it would be a dangerous journey. Suppose the battle should break out again? Would it not be more prudent to follow the example of so many citizens of Brussels and move in the opposite direction, to the safety of Antwerp?

The girls explained over and over again that they were seeking a particular British officer who had taken part in the fighting. They would pay good money to be driven to the correct destination.

Very unwillingly, the young countryman finally agreed to do as they asked, and helped load their luggage into the little cart, together with some bottles of wine and a big basket of cold food provided by the landlady. It might be a long time before they would get another meal.

At last they set off—the driver up on the front seat above the horse, and the two girls, with Ivory between them in her wicker basket, at the back of the vehicle. It was fortunate that the weather had improved a little. It had stopped raining by now, and once or twice the sun made a feeble attempt to come out from behind the lowering clouds overhead.

Garnet, as a stranger to the city, watched the busy

OLD WORLD

streets go by with scant interest; in any case, her thoughts were all upon Brock. But Cassie kept looking about her and frowning.

"I don't understand the way he is taking us," she said. "This isn't a route that I recognize at all . . ."

She queried the driver. He answered curtly over his shoulder that he was taking a shortcut. Eventually the city streets gave place to dirt roads and the buildings were left behind, but still Cassie remained puzzled.

"I've never come out by this gate," she said. "*M'sieu*, are you positive this is the road toward the French border? *Vous êtes bien sur?*"

The man nodded impatiently, and spat into the puddles at the side of the roadway, which were beginning to steam under the thin, watery sun. A few minutes later, they passed a signpost, and Cassie read the single placename—"Mechelen."

"I knew it. . . . The cunning devil!" she said under her breath.

"What's wrong?" asked Garnet.

"Mechelen is in the province of Antwerp. He's too scared to take us the way we want to go, so he's brought us out of the city in the wrong direction after all. No doubt he's planning to take our money and leave us stranded somewhere."

Garnet clenched her fists. "What can we do?"

"Leave it to me. I have a plan. . . . Could you drive this wagon, do you think?"

"I should imagine it's not difficult. That old horse looks docile enough, but why?"

"Wait and see. Ask no questions—just follow my lead."

Cassie waited a little longer, until she saw a pleasant grove of trees at the side of the road, and then hailed the driver once more. Indicating the food and drink they had brought with them, she explained that they were looking for a suitable spot where they could

rest awhile, and enjoy a picnic. Would the obliging young man be so good as to pull up beside that little coppice, and join them in a light luncheon?

This was an invitation he could scarcely refuse. He pulled on the reins and turned the wagon in a half-circle off the road, then brought the old mare to a halt.

Cassie whispered to Garnet: "You stay here and mind the baby for a few moments. But be ready to leave as soon as I return."

Then she climbed down from the wagon and requested the wagoner to follow her, bringing a carriage rug with him. She explained that they had to search for an agreeable picnic place—not too near the road, somewhere under the trees, where they might find a patch of dry ground—and preferably shielded from the inquisitive eyes of any passersby.

She led the way through a thicket of hawthorn bushes, and there discovered a pretty little glade, where the grass was sheltered by overhanging branches, and a blackbird sang in a leafy tree.

"The perfect setting!" she exclaimed, smiling at the young man in a friendly way, and instructed him to unfold the rug and spread it out.

"No—not there—here . . . no—*here*, I think. A little farther under the trees. . . . Let me lie down and see if it is quite comfortable."

The young wagoner stared at her in amazement as she lay back, spreading her arms and legs luxuriously.

"Oh, yes, this is very comfortable. But I wonder if it's spacious enough for more than one person? Perhaps we'd better make sure." She beckoned him to assist her by getting down on the rug beside her.

He obeyed, as if he were in a dream. And slowly—very slowly—the first faint glimmer of anticipation dawned in his eyes, while Cassie stretched out at full length, only a few tantalizing inches away.

OLD WORLD

She looked up into his face—and almost laughed aloud at his bemused, but greedy expression. He could hardly believe his good fortune. He put out a tentative hand, greatly daring, and touched her breast. She put her hand upon his, and stroked it gently, provocatively.

"You like this?" he asked, in a guttural Flemish accent that she found hard to understand. "You like *me* . . . ?"

"Yes, yes," she breathed. "I like you very much. But we must be quick, before my friend comes to find us."

Emboldened, he rolled over to embrace her, and began fumbling with her clothes, but she stopped him.

"No, there is no time for that," she said. "You must take off your clothes, and I will take off mine—please hurry!"

He needed no second bidding; scrambling to his feet, he began to pull off his old canvas jacket, and the rough woollen shirt beneath. Then, with an instinctive modesty, he turned his back to Cassie as he unfastened the piece of rope that held up his filthy old breeches.

As soon as she saw his breeches tumble and the hairy cheeks of his backside revealed, Cassie moved like lightning.

In one swift movement she gathered up the carriage rug and took to her heels. Seconds later, she was scrambling into the wagon beside a startled Garnet.

"Right—into the driving seat with you—and give the horse a touch of the whip!"

The wheels crunched over the stones in the road, and Garnet saw from the corner of her eye the monstrous spectacle of the young man stumbling through the bushes, waving and shouting. He was stark naked but for the breeches around his ankles, and totally incapable of pursuit. As his bellow of rage faded into the distance, Cassie cried cheerfully: "Now we're on our way at last. Full speed ahead!"

ROSEWOOD

Garnet encouraged the old horse to a surprising jogtrot, then asked: "But that young man. I can't help feeling—shouldn't we perhaps—?"

Cassie cut in succinctly:

"Forget him. He got what he deserved, which is nothing, *nothing!* Not even a picnic!"

Chapter Five

UNDER DISCIPLINE

Garnet felt a sudden surge of optimism as she flicked the old mare with the whip, and the little wagon bowled along merrily toward Brussels once more. The girls giggled together over the plight of the young man they had left behind, and the sorry picture he presented. The sight of a naked body can on occasion, be comical, just as, under different circumstances, it can be exciting—or moving—or even beautiful.

It can also be an object of horror and revulsion, as the two girls were soon to discover.

The journey through Brussels was long and tedious, for the roads were now thronged with traffic. As they left the city by a southeasterly route, they found their progress continually impeded by a train of horses, carts, carriages—the pitiful fugitives from the battlefield, in their hundreds.

Thousands more were on foot, dragging themselves along as best they might, some with an arm or a leg missing, and a bloodstained garment that told its own tale. Still others had to be supported by their comrades. A few had improvised crutches or walking sticks out of wooden palings or branches from the hedgerow. Horses, mules, pack ponies—all these crowded the roadway, making the going very difficult for the little wagon, but they pressed on nevertheless.

And there were many being borne along on the ebbtide that flowed back to Brussels who were too far gone for any support to assist them—many dying,

many more already dead. Corpses being transported back to a church, for Christian burial.

Garnet found herself scanning the faces as they passed, with a kind of frozen expectancy. "No . . . not that one . . . nor that. No . . . No, it is not her. Thank heaven he is not there."

A signpost with a single wooden finger pointed crazily ahead. A stray fragment of shrapnel had half-demolished it, and it hung loose, creaking in the wind, bearing the single legend: "Waterloo."

That this was the site of the battle, they needed no telling. They could smell it, even before they reached it. For over twenty-four hours now, the bodies had been left to lie on the sodden ground, and they had already begun to putrefy. The stench was overpowering.

"In God's name—" The exclamation was wrung from Cassie's lips, as she put her handkerchief to her nose and mouth, trying to blot out the vile odor. "These men are *naked!*"

It was true. Almost every corpse left to rot upon the field had been stripped of its clothing. The cause was not far to seek. A pack of stooping women—and a few men among them—prowled over the terrain like vultures, their cloaks or skirts flapping like ragged wings as they zigzagged to and fro. They made a sudden dart here and there, pouncing upon any item that might still be of value. A tunic—a pair of boots—a crucifix. As the wagon rolled slowly on, Garnet saw the looters gather and heard a shrill, discordant chatter of argument as they disputed the right to a ring that was still upon a man's hand. The fingers had stiffened already, so they could not get the ring off. Someone pulled out a knife, and Garnet looked away . . .

"Let us get out of this hellish place!" Cassie almost choked upon the words. "I feel sick. Let's go—"

"I have to find my husband," said Garnet, continu-

ing to drive on. "He may be close at hand and I must find him."

Suddenly, to Cassie's dismay, she reined the horse in, and the wagon shuddered to a halt.

"What is it? Why are we stopping?"

Garnet's face was as white as snow, and her lips were bloodless, as she replied: "I think perhaps—I have found him at last. . . . There is someone lying—over there. I can't be sure but I believe it is Brock. Wait here for me."

She left Cassie to mind the baby, who continued to sleep soundly in her basket, and slipped down from the driving seat. Cassie protested: "No, don't leave us. You're insane—how *can* you go among those stinking corpses?"

"It is not the first time I have seen death," Garnet replied. "I traveled with Brock before now, in other campaigns. . . . Don't be afraid, I will be as quick as I can."

She made her way carefully across the muddy ground, ploughed up as if an earthquake had shattered it. Picking her way through the charnelhouse of bloated, discolored limbs and torsos, her gaze fixed upon that one body, propped up against a tree stump, which had caught her eye.

Was he alive or dead? The face was turned away, and she could not tell, but from the line of the shoulder, the twist of the head, the figure had a look of Brock that made her blood run cold.

At last she reached him, and put out a hand, turning the body toward her.

The man had been killed instantly; there was no doubt about that. A burst of musket fire had taken away one side of his features entirely, and his face was a gaping, bloody mask.

But what remained was still, recognizably, a stranger. She had been mistaken; it was not Brock.

With a feeling of relief—and an instant, shaming realization of guilt—she was *glad* that this stranger

had died instead of Brock! Garnet retraced her steps to the wagon.

As she approached, she saw that Cassie had been joined by a newcomer, and she quickened her pace. If one of the graverobbers elected to take the young woman as a victim, she could not defend herself for long. And as for Ivory—

But when she reached the wagon, she saw that Cassie had, instead, found a protector—a young man in the uniform of a British captain, with his right arm bound up in a rough-and-ready sling, and a smudge of red that crept down from his shoulder. They had been talking in low tones, and broke off as Garnet came toward them.

“Do not forget what I said,” Cassie concluded, with a meaning look at the young officer.

“Indeed, ma’am, I shall not,” he replied, seeming a little bemused. But he turned to Garnet and extended his left hand as Cassie performed the introductions.

“This is the lady of whom I spoke—Mrs. Savage. Garnet, this is Captain Daintry.”

“You must forgive my appearance, ma’am,” said the Captain. “As you see, I suffered a slight injury in our recent engagement. I suppose I must have lost consciousness, for when I came to myself, I found that I had been left for dead—and a parcel of hags were trying to strip my garments from me!”

Cassie’s eyes sparkled, as she said, “You must have given them a considerable shock, I am sure.”

“I think so—they fell away, screeching like banshees when I cursed them. And one of the old crones dropped a shirt she had in her clutches. So I appropriated that and tore it up to make this sling, as you see. It’s not very secure, but I managed as well as possible with my left hand.”

“Let me assist you, Captain,” said Garnet.

“I have already offered my help, but the Captain

OLD WORLD

would not allow me to detain him," Cassie explained. "He is impatient to be off and away at once."

"It was generous of you, ma'am." Another look flashed between Cassie and the officer, and then he continued to Garnet: "As I explained to this good lady, I am anxious to be on my way, for a small party of British officers went by here barely half an hour ago. They were in too much of a hurry to take me with them—and their horses were already overburdened—but they said if I made my way to Mons, I should find food and shelter there, and medical attention too, perhaps."

"British officers?" Garnet dug her fingernails into her palms and prayed. "Did you by any chance know any of them by name? Are you acquainted with my husband—Major-General Savage?"

"Yes, ma'am. I know him by sight—and by reputation, of course. He is a very fine soldier."

"Thank you. But he was not among the little party you mentioned?"

"No, these were the ragtag and bobtail of the attack—the rearguard, so to speak, clearing up any remaining snipers. Wherever your husband may be, I am quite sure he will be in the forefront of the advance—up with the chiefs-of-staff—at Mons, perhaps."

"And how far away is that from here?" Garnet asked.

"Twenty miles as the crow flies, they say thirty by road, perhaps."

"Then climb into the wagon, Captain, and help us to find our way. For we are all going to Mons!"

So the journey continued, through one of the longest and most anxious days Garnet had ever known.

It was nightfall when they reached their destination at last and even then the quest was not over, for Mons—though not a large town—was totally overrun by British and Prussian troops, and it was hard to find any definite information. Then a chance encounter in

ROSEWOOD

a cafe solved all problems; a friendly lieutenant advised Captain Daintry to try and obtain accommodation at the Hotel du Cerf—for that's where most of the senior officers were billeted. And further questioning soon elicited the fact that Major-General Savage was among them.

Five minutes later, Garnet—having made her way through a series of guards, sentries and aides-de-camp like a whirlwind—burst into the room where Brock was sitting, trying to compose a letter.

He put down his pen slowly and rose to his feet, overwhelmed.

"I was just writing a few lines to tell you I am safe—and here you are," he began, holding out his arms to her. "It's like a fairytale. How do you manage to be here? . . . And where is Ivory?"

"I will tell you, all in good time," breathed Garnet, giving herself up to the joy of his embrace. "Oh, Brock, Brock—never let me go . . ."

"But where is our daughter?" he repeated, when at last they broke from their long kiss. "You haven't left her in Brussels?"

"She is below, in the care of my good friend, Cassandra Mayne. . . . Oh, Brock, we are so fortunate. Meeting Cassie at the ball was such a lucky chance! I don't know what I should have done without her."

That night, as they lay in bed together, Brock watched with a glow of satisfaction as Garnet fed Ivory, and listened as she recounted the story of her adventures.

"So you see—thanks to Cassie, and Captain Daintry—and the hand of God, we are reunited, my dear love; and I never want to be separated from you again."

"This Miss Mayne sounds as if she must be a remarkably strong-minded young lady," commented Brock dryly. "From your description of the way she contrived to give that scoundrel wagoner the slip . . ."

OLD WORLD

Garnet flushed slightly, and smiled at Brock from under her lashes.

"It was a little bold of her, I confess," she agreed. "But I honestly think nothing else would have served, under the circumstances. And as I told you, it all turned out for the best."

"But suppose the plan had misfired, and he had mastered her instead—an unmarried woman, alone and helpless?"

Garnet laughed: "I have an idea that Cassie generally gets her own way, in the end!"

"Yes. I suspect you may be right."

Brock spoke thoughtfully. He scarcely knew the young lady, of course, but during their short encounter at the ball—and again this evening, over dinner—he had formed the conclusion that there was more to Miss Cassandra Mayne than met the eye. And what met the eye was striking enough, in all conscience. There was something about the way she looked at him across the dinner table—something in her smile, her tone of voice, her level, appraising glance. . . . Brock Savage felt obscurely stirred, and not a little disturbed, even as he thought of her.

He watched Garnet settling their daughter for the night, and as she returned to the bed, he realized that he was physically excited.

"Come to me," he said softly, as she climbed in beside him.

"Why, Brock—I thought you were tired. We both agreed, we felt exhausted after the tensions of the past few days."

"I am not exhausted now. I feel I have the strength of ten men." He drew her to him, and she could feel his muscle, rigid as a coiled spring. "Give me your mouth, Garnet . . . give me yourself . . ."

Their lovemaking that night was hungry and desperate. Again and again, their bodies thrust together, striving and searching for relief—and at last they lay

with their legs and arms enlaced, the flow of their passion ebbing away in long, rhythmic waves.

"Brock." Garnet's voice was a breathless murmur breaking the silence.

"What?"

"I was thinking—about Cassie," she said slowly.

He stiffened instinctively. The thought of Cassie had been in his mind also, but how could Garnet have known that?

"What of her?" he asked, after a pause.

"She has been such a good friend to me—and she has nowhere else to go, and no one to turn to. Brock, do you think we could ask her to stay with us for a while? Until we all go back to England, at least? You said yourself that once we reached Belgium I should hire someone to help look after Ivory—and I don't want a local girl whom I could hardly understand. Cassie will be more than just a nursemaid; she will be a companion for me."

"Well, my love, if that is what you want . . ."

He left the sentence unfinished. He could raise no objection; he had no fault to find with Miss Mayne's conduct—and yet . . . and yet . . .

When he went to sleep, he was still thinking of those pale gray eyes, fringed with thick black lashes, and that head of sleek, corn-colored hair.

The next day, the allied armies were on the move again. Garnet, together with Cassie and Ivory, rode with the baggage wagons, to the rear of the column. Brock Savage took his place among the leading reconnaissance party, at the head of the advance—and at one stage he found himself riding side by side with the young officer he had met the previous evening, Captain Daintry.

"Very glad to have been able to assist your wife, sir," the young man began. "A most charming lady—and you have a beautiful daughter, too."

"Kind of you to say so," grunted Brock.

OLD WORLD

"It's no more than the truth. You must be very proud of them both."

"I am, Captain." They rode for a while in silence, and then Brock asked abruptly, "You don't mention my wife's companion, I notice. Miss Mayne? Do you have no comments upon that young lady?"

The Captain did not answer immediately. Brock glanced across at him and was surprised to find that his face had darkened and he appeared to be debating the matter with himself. Finally he said:

"Miss Mayne is a very fine young woman. . . . Damned attractive, of course—and vastly obliging."

"Obliging?"

"She—she insisted on helping me strap up my shoulder last night, when we settled in at the hotel. She put on a new dressing and tied me into a more efficient sling. I was extremely grateful to her."

"But?" Brock urged him.

"But?" Captain Daintry frowned. "I did not say 'but' . . ."

"You sounded as if you were about to. . . . You have some reservations about Miss Mayne, perhaps?"

"No, sir—not exactly. Except—" The Captain cleared his throat, and began again. "When she came to my room, when she took charge of the bandaging and so on. . . . Well, I cannot be disloyal to her: A gentleman doesn't betray confidences, you understand. . . . Suffice it to say, she took advantage of the situation, rather. . . . She's a very surprising young lady."

"I'm interested to hear you say so, Captain. For I was beginning to form a similar opinion myself."

They were interrupted by a hoarse shout of command. Somewhere along the line of marching men, an altercation had broken out.

"Damned stragglers," remarked Captain Daintry, eager to change the subject. "It sounds as if they're causing more trouble."

"Some of the infantry are too tired—or too ill—to

keep up the pace," Brock pointed out. "The Duke is driving the regiment very hard."

"He has no choice, sir. We must maintain the advance upon Paris. And he has given strict instructions that any man falling out of the column, for whatever reason, should be dealt with instantly. There can be no exceptions!"

"I'm aware of that, Captain Daintry. Our commanding officer is a great believer in the efficacy of corporal punishment . . . which is perhaps why he is more beloved by his officers than by the rank-and-file . . ."

As they continued their progress toward the French frontier, they could hear from somewhere behind them the crack of a cat-o'-nine-tails and the animal scream of an exhausted soldier being flogged.

When the baggage wagon passed along that way an hour later, Garnet saw the survivor being helped to his feet at the roadside. He was naked except for a breechclout, and his back was crisscrossed with raw, red scars. The sweat and blood that ran down his body had left strange patterns upon his grimy skin, and he looked half dead. But still he was forced to join the endless march and stumble on with his companions.

Garnet swung around, so that the infant in her lap should be shielded from this grisly sight.

Cassie stared at her. "You are inconsistent, surely? You could walk through that field of corpses without flinching—and yet you turn your face from that stupid defaulter, who probably earned his punishment!"

"Very well. I am inconsistent. . . . But the one thing I cannot abide is cruelty," said Garnet.

"It must be necessary sometimes," said Cassie. "These men are serving in a fighting force. They have to obey orders or take the consequence—they are under discipline."

"Yes," replied Garnet quietly. "I know that . . . but don't expect me to enjoy it!"

It was the beginning of July by the time that the allies

reached the outskirts of Paris. Certain strongholds of defense had met their advance with heroic opposition, and the commanders were expecting a hard struggle to take the French capital, but in the event, their expectations were confounded. As they mounted an attack upon the suburbs of St. Denis, there was a surprise order to cease fire.

At the eleventh hour, Napoleon had surrendered and was soon dispatched to his final exile on the island of St. Helena.

"It was as if," Brock told Garnet later, "we had been mounting a tug-of-war, and as we took the strain, the enemy let go of the rope. Suddenly—there was an armistice, and the war was over."

Instead of fighting his way into the city, Brock found himself at the head of the victory parade, as a leader of the army of occupation. Later, in keeping with the prestige of his new position, he was allocated to a smart house in the Rue de Rivoli, and there established himself, his staff, his wife, his baby daughter—and his wife's companion, Miss Mayne.

To begin with, their life in Paris was one long round of social activities. Receptions, parties, balls, banquets, soirées, race-meetings—they were inundated with invitation cards. Garnet and Cassie went shopping in the most fashionable *quartier*, and, thanks to Brock's generosity, came home laden with packages. New gowns, new shoes, new bonnets—even little Ivory was arrayed in splendid style!

But the baby did not seem to enjoy these elegant surroundings. She fretted when she was put into a new layette of embroidered muslin. She spat out the bread and milk they offered her upon a silver spoon. She howled when her Mama took her out for an airing in the gardens of the Palais du Louvre. She was being treated like a little princess, and so she protested royally.

Garnet began to worry about her daughter's health. Perhaps there was something in the air of Paris that did

not agree with her? Therefore, when Brock, going through his morning mail over breakfast, extracted yet another gilt-edged invitation card—a regimental dinner party and dance to celebrate the victory—Garnet shook her head.

“Tonight? Oh, no, Brock—not tonight. You must make my apologies.”

“My dear, I know it’s short notice, but I cannot refuse—”

“It’s not that. You must go, of course—it’s your duty, and you have to be there—but I don’t want to leave Ivory this evening. I really think she may be unwell.”

Brock tried to reassure her that the baby would come to no harm in her mother’s absence for a few hours, but Garnet refused to change her mind. If Ivory was ailing, her place was at home, to nurse her.

“I shall not be missed. Besides, you know I’m very bad at making polite conversation with all those stuffy generals and their silly wives.”

“It’s not the conversation that concerns me. I was thinking of the dance after dinner. I shall be condemned to an endless succession of boring partners if you are not there to rescue me.”

“That’s easily solved!” Garnet smiled, and turned to Cassie who was breakfasting with them. “Cassie shall go as your partner, in my place!”

Brock hesitated. “Oh . . . but—perhaps Miss Mayne does not wish to give up her spare time for such a tedious evening?”

Cassie raised her eyes from her plate and said demurely: “I should enjoy it very much indeed, sir. How kind of you both, to include me in the invitation.”

So that settled the matter; and while Garnet stayed at home, Brock found himself escorting a new partner to the celebrations. He had to admit that she was a very entertaining companion. She had a supply of small talk that was witty and lively, and at dinner she kept her side of the table in a continual ripple of amusement.

After dinner they repaired to the ballroom as the or-

chestra struck up for dancing, and she excelled here, too. She was small and light on her feet, and Brock found that they made an accomplished couple upon the floor.

She faced him with the hint of a mocking smile and kept her gaze fixed on him all the while, never relaxing for a moment to study the other dancers. He felt uncomfortable, yet strangely elated.

And there was that look in her eyes again, as if she could see into his heart—and as if she was amused by what she saw there.

"You must not think such things," she chided him, gaily.

"Must I not? And how do you know what I am thinking, pray?" he asked, in a tone equally light. "Do you make a practice of reading other people's thoughts?"

"Only certain people," she answered. "Certain men. . . . Yes, I know what you are thinking at this moment—but don't be alarmed, I would never dream of telling anyone."

He knew that her words were meaningless; nothing but conventional chitchat, between a man and a woman at a party—but all the same he was uneasy. He remembered what Captain Daintry had said about Cassie—and he felt the physical tension between them, like a silver chain that linked them together, as if he were under some kind of spell . . .

"You're quite right, of course," Cassie broke in, laughing. "It's perfectly true—I *am* a witch!"

Then the music ended and they stopped dancing. There was a polite spatter of applause, and they walked away from the ballroom. Brock resolved that he would find a diplomatic way of bringing the evening to an early close and returning to Garnet as soon as possible.

But they were waylaid by a stranger. A young ensign in full-dress uniform stepped out in front of them.

He bowed and smiled at Cassie, and then addressed himself to Brock.

"Sir, forgive me for presenting myself to you without an introduction, but I have the pleasure of this lady's acquaintance, I believe . . . My name is Hartletop, Charles Hartletop, Ensign, Sixth Dragoons."

"How do you do, sir?" replied Brock civilly, and turned to Cassie.

She was not smiling, but there was a gleam of interest in her eyes, and she inclined her head politely.

"Mr. Hartletop, I am flattered you should remember me after—how long is it? Three years? Four?"

"Nearly five, I believe." Charles Hartletop included Brock in the conversation. "When I was a mere school-boy, I was fortunate enough to receive lessons from Miss Mayne, in French, arithmetic, history and geography."

"Lord and Lady Hartletop were my employers at that time," Cassie explained, without any apparent embarrassment. "And I have very happy memories of my stay at Hartwell House."

"And now you are staying in Paris?" the young man continued. "Perhaps you would give me your address, so I may do myself the honor of calling upon you tomorrow. Then I hope we may compare our happy recollections?"

"If the major-general has no objection?" Cassie glanced a question at Brock. "For my present post is as companion to Mrs. Savage. It may not be convenient for me to receive visitors."

"I'm sure that we shall be delighted to welcome any friend of yours at the Rue de Rivoli, Miss Mayne," said Brock. "But now—if you will excuse me—I must draw our evening to a close, for I am rather anxious to return there, and set my wife's mind at rest. Good night to you, Mr. Hartletop. I hope we may meet again soon."

But they did not do so, for upon the following day Garnet declared that Ivory seemed to have taken a

turn for the better, and she felt sure that all she needed was fresh air and sunshine. Accordingly, she persuaded Brock to take them out for a promenade in the Bois de Boulogne during the afternoon; and when Charles Hartleup presented himself at the Rue de Rivoli, he was shown in to the drawing room and found himself alone with Cassie.

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise and no mistake," he announced.

He strode to the fireplace and stood with his back to the grate, making himself at home. Cassie, who was occupied with an embroidery frame and an assortment of colored silks, looked him up and down once, and then proceeded with her task, smiling to herself.

He could not be more than nineteen, but he had grown apace in the last five years, and as he stood nonchalantly with one elbow resting upon the marble mantel, he seemed to be very much the young man-about-town. He was even, she noticed with amusement, sporting a rudimentary moustache upon his upper lip; and as he talked, he drew an enameled snuffbox from his pocket.

"Cassie Mayne, of all people—established in Paris! Well, well—it's a small world, to be sure." He took a dexterous pinch of snuff, and put it on the back of his hand, preparatory to sniffing it. "You've not changed at all, my dear Cassie—except of course you're lovelier than ever."

"How gallant of you to remark upon it, Mr. Hartleup. Though, of course, *you* have changed a great deal."

"Quite so. I was a scrubby urchin then, no doubt. Now that I'm a man, I don't suppose you'd have recognized me, eh?"

"You're taller and broader—but otherwise very little changed . . . except that your manners appear to have deteriorated sadly," she remarked, plying her needle.

"How's that?" He gave a half-laugh, unable to decide whether she spoke in jest.

"When you were a schoolboy, you had many tiresome little habits, but at least you always addressed me as Miss Mayne. I don't believe I gave you permission to call me by my first name."

"Oh—well, we're old friends, surely? We can relax when we're on our own. . . . Damme, I remember one or two occasions when we behaved a good deal less formally!"

"Don't swear! And *don't* take snuff in my presence. It's a filthy custom."

One small hand shot out and slapped his wrist sharply as he was about to raise the tobacco to his nostrils. The powder flew off in a little cloud, and Charles sneezed explosively.

"Hang it all, Cassie—*atchoo!*—now you've made me waste it, and it's deuced expensive—*atchoo!*"

"*Don't call me Cassie!* You will address me as Miss—just as you used to." She flung out the words like a slap in the face, and Charles blinked, as if he had received an actual blow.

"I say—don't be such a c-c-crosspatch. . . . After all, we used to be pretty close in the old days."

"You think so? I notice you've begun stammering again, just as you always did when you were in the wrong. You still have that childish stammer, then?"

"N-no—not at all. . . . I've overcome it completely, Cassie—" He caught himself too late, as her eyes flashed. "Miss, I should say."

"You should indeed, Master Hartletop. I wonder whether you still have all those other little habits that I tried to break?"

She put down her embroidery and rose to her feet, standing very close to him. He retreated a step, and she followed, putting one hand upon his sleeve.

"Do you still entertain shameful thoughts about women, Master Hartletop? . . . Shameful thoughts—

about *me*? Is that why you called to see me today?"

"No—of course not!"

He would have retreated further, but his back was against the mantel by now, and he had begun to sweat.

"I remember I found you spying upon me one day in my bedroom, when I was undressing. . . . I had to punish you for your wickedness then. Had you forgotten that?"

He opened and shut his mouth, but no sound came. She laughed, very gently.

"It was only fair, after all. You had caught me half-undressed, so I taught you what it felt like to be so humiliated. . . . I undressed *you*, just a little—didn't I?"

As she spoke, she let her hand slip lightly from his arm to his chest, and from his chest to his waist, as if her fingers were moving of their own accord, without any conscious effort on her part.

"And we discovered then—did we not?—that you let your evil thoughts get the better of you. You were in a state of such excitement that I was scandalized by your wanton ways. . . . I commanded you to put such foul notions out of your head, immediately. But the more I scolded you, the more you were aroused."

"I tried to behave myself. I did, truly—" he gasped, blushing and trembling. "It wasn't my fault. I couldn't help myself—"

"So you always said, but we knew better, didn't we? We knew it was your natural sinfulness that made you so lustful. . . . Why, I believe you're in a state of carnal desire at this very instant—!"

Her fingers swooped down and closed upon his crotch. He wriggled in torment, but there was no escape.

"I knew it . . . you've still not learned your lesson, Master Hartletop. What am I to do with you?"

"Cassie—Miss, please," he begged her, but she would not let him go, though he tried to push her hand away.

"Oh, no—you mustn't touch me. We know where that leads, don't we?" She stared at him, her eyes enormous, the pupils so dilated that the gray was almost swallowed up in deepest black. "Don't you dare to lay a finger upon me, you brute! . . . *Turn around!*"

Now her voice cracked like a whip, and he obeyed without question.

"I'm glad to see you understand the meaning of obedience. That's one thing the army has taught you, no doubt. You know now what it means to be under discipline . . ."

As she spoke, she pulled his arms behind him and picked up a thick skein of embroidery silk. The silk was soft, but she tied it so tightly that it cut into his wrists, and he gave a strangled exclamation of pain.

"Silence! Don't dare to move—and don't interrupt me while I am speaking. I'm determined to conquer this vile lust of yours, once and for all. . . . You want to subdue the sins of the flesh, don't you? And you want me to help you—as I always did? Very well then. You must make an effort of will to resist the temptations Satan puts into your head, Master Hartletop. Even when I put my arms around your waist—like this—you must be man enough to master your rising appetites. Do you understand me? You must not give way to your base nature . . . you must aspire to purity . . ."

All the time she spoke, she let her hands roam over his body. He was so much taller now than the schoolboy she had dominated five years before, but in other ways he had not changed. As she explored his legs, his flanks, the sensitive area of his inner thighs, she felt him twitching and throbbing convulsively under her teasing fingertips. She continued to talk in a low, thrilling monotone as she slowly unbuttoned his clothes.

"You must not allow yourself to become excited in this way—do you hear? You must control yourself at once. Why, you young monster, you're positively glorying in your wickedness—you want me to stroke

you, don't you? You've no intention of reforming. You actually wish me to continue touching you there—and there. . . . You're begging for it, you disgusting little beast, begging me to do it to you—like *so, so, so*—”

“P-p-please, miss. Stop—for pity's sake stop—or—or—”

“Or what? What will you do? Speak up, can't you?”

She redoubled her efforts, her hands tormenting him mercilessly, while he fought for breath, unable to utter any coherent sounds.

“I c-c-c—”

And then in a final frenzy his body jerked uncontrollably, and the dam that held back his passion was swept away in a flood of relief, and fear, and ecstasy, and shame. . . . And he burst into tears.

“No, you haven't changed, have you?” she whispered gloatingly, as she untied his hands. “Poor little Charlie. Still a crybaby . . .”

Chapter Six

A DREAM OF DARKNESS

"No, I will *not* see the Austrian general! How many times must I tell you, Daintry? No, no, and *no!*"

Major-General Savage banged the green-baize cover of the conference table with his clenched fist, making the inkstand and the water carafe rattle.

"Sir, the Duke expressly desired you to meet General Sacher. It seems there was an unfortunate incident in the Place Vendôme last night, between an Austrian detachment and a party of Russian officers—"

"Let them settle their own quarrels. I am too busy to attend to these everlasting nursery squabbles . . ."

He broke off, as the sound of a wailing cry from the floor above interrupted his pronouncement. There were nursery squabbles of a different kind in the Rue de Rivoli, and Miss Ivory Savage was making a protest of her own.

Captain Daintry fought to conceal a smile, but old Brock was not in the mood to appreciate the joke.

"The worst thing that could ever have happened to this city was to be occupied by the troops of four foreign powers," Brock continued. "If it's not the Prussians destroying a public monument, it's the Russians looting, or the Austrians challenging everyone else to a series of duels."

"And that is why the Duke relies upon you, sir, to keep the peace," Daintry pointed out tactfully.

"Peace? What peace? I tell you, Captain, if one shot

was fired in Paris tonight, the entire country would rise against us tomorrow."

Certainly, since the final victory over Napoleon Bonaparte, the sweet savor of the allied triumph had turned very sour indeed; and in the weeks that followed, Brock Savage found his task almost impossibly difficult.

Prussians, Russians and Austrians alike paraded their grievances publicly, and sought occasions to pick quarrels. Ex-Bonapartist officers, with a load of guilt and humiliation heavy upon them, were quick to provoke angry incidents, snubbing the occupying troops and insulting them at every opportunity.

Only the British somehow contrived to remain calm and stoic in the face of this continual unrest, and it fell to Brock to do his best to pour oil on the troubled waters.

"Quite so, sir. . . . Perhaps, when General Sacher arrives for his meeting with you at twelve noon, you could put that very point to him," suggested Daintry.

"Why can't General Sacher and the Russians sort out their own differences?" Brock grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Unfortunately, sir, they are not at present on speaking terms. They need you to act as mediator."

"Go-between, you should say. . . . Oh, very well. If I must, I must. Tell the General I will be happy to receive him at noon, damn his eyes."

The double doors of the conference room swung open, and Garnet came in eagerly, with Ivory in her arms; they were both dressed and bonneted, ready to go out.

"Brock dear, I won't interrupt you, but—oh, good morning, Captain Daintry," she began. "I only came in to remind you that we arranged to meet for lunch in the Bois de Boulogne at one o'clock."

"Ah . . . I'm sorry, my dear. I'm afraid something has just cropped up which means I must forgo that pleasure," Brock sighed.

"Oh, surely not! You *promised*—"

"Captain Daintry, I need not detain you any longer," Brock cut in, and his adjutant clicked his heels smartly, bowed and retired.

When the doors shut behind him, Brock continued: "My dearest girl, I should like nothing better than to meet you in the Bois, but I have to see General Sacher at twelve, and from what I know of the gentleman, we shall still be arguing at three. . . . I can't get out of it. The task was imposed on me by the Duke himself."

"How very tiresome of the Duke," said Garnet. "We were looking forward to it so much, weren't we, darling?"

She clucked sympathetically at the baby, who gurgled back at her, her good humor now restored once more.

"Perhaps we may postpone it for another occasion," Brock began.

"Oh, no. I think we shall go to the Bois in any case. It's all arranged—the carriage has been ordered."

"Do you really wish to go alone?" asked Brock, doubtfully.

"We shan't be alone, shall we, Ivory? I shall ask Cassie to come in your place, to keep us company. She will enjoy a little outing."

Brock's face darkened, as he said: "Garnet, you know I do not greatly admire Miss Mayne. I wish you would not make such a personal friend of her—"

"What a difficult man you are!" Garnet smiled, refusing to take him seriously. "You won't take me to lunch—and yet you disapprove when I find myself another companion. Really, there's no pleasing you sometimes!"

She straightened the baby's bonnet, and added: "Besides, what could you possibly find to dislike in poor Cassie? She's the nicest, funniest person in the world—and I defy you to tell me one disagreeable thing about her!"

Brock lifted his shoulders and let them fall.

It was true; he could not accuse Miss Cassandra Mayne of any misdemeanor. Ever since she had joined their household, she had been perfectly obliging and perfectly correct in every way. And yet he sensed something in her that kept him continually on his guard, and he could not say what that something might be.

"You see? You've nothing against her really. Well, we mustn't keep you from your disagreeable duties any longer. Come along, Ivory—we shall go and leave Papa in peace. Perhaps one day soon, he will have time to devote to us for a change!"

At the door, she turned to say:

"Next Saturday, for example! You won't disappoint us on Saturday, will you? The day of the regimental race meeting? Don't you dare forget *that!*"

Brock nodded, and promised faithfully that he would not fail her a second time.

As soon as he was alone, he put his head in his hands. There was at least one small compensation; while Garnet was cheerfully occupied with her own affairs, it was easier for him to conceal his own troubles from her.

Everything, it seemed, conspired to make him discontented, for he detested the job that he was called upon to do. His military experience had been gained upon the battlefield, not in the corridors of international diplomacy. He disliked city life, and longed to break out of the confines of the smart, sophisticated capital; and he disliked above all having to leave his beloved wife and child to themselves for the greater part of each day—and the fact that Garnet's only companion and confidante was Miss Cassandra Mayne.

He pounded his knuckles into his temples and closed his eyes, trying to drive off the waves of pain and dizziness that swept over him. For all these other adversities could have been endured, if only he had not begun to suffer once again the disabling consequences of his old wound. It was getting steadily worse, there was

no doubt of that. The pain attacked him mercilessly, sometimes once a day, sometimes more often; and when it came, it left him helpless.

He could not—*would* not—speak of it to Garnet; he did not want her to know when he was laid low. Nor could he consult the army doctors, and ask them to prescribe for him. He feared that they might put in a report to his superiors, saying he was no longer fit for service. Therefore he suffered in silence, and waited, and prayed that this bout of sickness would cure itself before long.

He hoped against hope that he might be completely recovered before the race on Saturday, and for a little while, it seemed that his hopes might be realized. Saturday dawned bright and clear; a perfect day for the races.

The event was being held in the open fields of Nevilly and a long oval racecourse had been laid out alongside an improvised grandstand and a refreshment pavilion. The sun shone, a little breeze ruffled the pennants and bunting that decorated the course, and the fashionable visitors arrived in their coaches, exclaiming with delight at the scene. The sky was blue, flecked by occasional scudding clouds of fleecy white, and the ladies raised parasols to ward off the rays of the sun.

Brock came on horseback, with many of the regimental officers. He was not taking an active part in the events—there were enough young captains and lieutenants eager to distinguish themselves upon the race-track—but he was one of the senior officers present, and had to take responsibility for the general organization.

From a distance, he saw Garnet taking her place in the grandstand, and he noticed that she was alone. So she had decided not to bring Miss Mayne on this occasion. He felt relieved, and suddenly, irrationally cheerful.

As soon as he had discharged his duties as President of the Mess, and given the starting signal for

the first race, he would make his way to the grandstand to join Garnet. He caught her eye above the heads of the crowd, and saluted; she smiled and waved, and kissed her hand. . . . He felt a glow of happiness. This was, after all, going to be a good day.

Then, as he trotted along, making his way across the paddock to the marquee that was used as a changing room by the young riders, he suddenly saw Cassie. She was talking to Captain Daintry; and she seemed to be trying to persuade him to escort her. Even at this distance—although Brock could not possibly hear a word of their conversation—he was aware that the Captain was doing his best to reject the proposition, as politely as possible. Cassie redoubled her efforts, putting her hand on his arm; the Captain disengaged himself.

At the same moment, Brock saw young Ensign Hartletop join them, greeting Cassie with an expression of wary excitement, suffused with blushes, but anxious to make himself understood despite a crippling stammer. Cassie brushed the lad aside ruthlessly, determined not to be deflected from her encounter with Captain Daintry; and it was at this point that Brock joined the little group.

“Good afternoon, Miss Mayne. So you have decided to come and keep my wife company after all?” Brock said. “If you are looking for her, I believe I just saw her in the grandstand.”

They all turned and looked up at him as he towered above them, in the saddle of his mount, a great black stallion. It was obvious that Captain Daintry welcomed the interruption. He looked angry and uncomfortable, and he seized this opportunity to escape.

“Excuse me, sir—ma’am—I must go and make myself ready. . . . I am due to ride in the first race.”

He slipped off into the crowd, and Brock noticed a gleam of hope in the Ensign’s expression. His hands were shaking, and when he tried to speak, his mouth opened but he could not produce a coherent sound.

Only Cassie herself was completely self-possessed.

She acknowledged Brock's greeting with a polite smile, and said, "Thank you for telling me, sir. I will go and join Mrs. Savage at once."

She turned and walked away, ignoring Ensign Hartle-top completely. The boy's face reddened still further, and he shuffled, uncomfortably. Brock felt a twinge of pity for him, in his mortification.

"Perhaps you would be kind enough to search for some refreshment for my wife and Miss Mayne, Ensign? I have some official duties to attend to; you would oblige me very much if you could provide the ladies with some glasses of iced cordial, on my behalf."

"Y-y-yes, sir—gladly, sir!" exclaimed the boy, his spirits restored, and he dashed off to make himself useful.

Brock watched him go, and thought about Cassie Mayne, and wondered. . . . What was this strange power she had to unsettle and disturb every man she encountered? Then he heard a gong summoning the riders of the first race, and he had to put these questions out of his head. He put spurs to his horse, and cantered up toward the starting post.

Suddenly, a stab of pain struck him, as if the bullet that had ripped open his temple, long ago in Vitoria, had returned to find its mark once more. He jerked up his head instinctively, and anyone watching might have thought him to have been shot in reality. His hands tightened upon the reins, and the great black charger reared up between his legs.

The next few minutes were a hellish eternity.

Again and again the pain struck, till Brock was almost crippled by it. He gripped the horse with his knees and clung on desperately, trying to carry out his allotted task. One by one the officers and their mounts edged into position at the starting line. He tried to count them—how many entrants were there in this race? Fifteen? Sixteen? . . . His vision doubled; he could no longer distinguish them clearly enough to number them off.

OLD WORLD

A vague blur of horses and riders swirled past him, and he struggled to give the order to start. He raised one hand, but as he signaled, another horse moved into position, and he heard a murmur of protest.

It was a false start. As he tried again, somewhere a voice muttered: "What's up with the old man? Has he been drinking?"

He gritted his teeth and tried with all his might to concentrate, fighting off the waves of nausea that rolled over him.

Again he lifted his right arm, and forced out the word:

"Away!"

This time the field got off to a clear start, and he was aware of Captain Daintry's face, set and grim, as he thundered past. The race was under way; now he could retire to the changing tent and try to rest. If only he could lie down . . .

He turned his horse in the direction of the paddock, fighting to take long, deep breaths; whatever happened, he must hang on just a little longer . . .

It was at this point that a knot of impatient spectators, kept back by a single rope at the side of the track, decided that they could not get a clear view of the field, and pressed forward.

A girl in a white dress tried to duck under the rope, slipped and scrambled upon all fours, immediately in the path of the black stallion.

Brock scarcely saw her. Almost blinded by another spasm, he could just detect a white blur beneath the horse's hooves—and he hauled upon the reins with every ounce of his remaining strength.

The charger gave a loud whinny and reared up, stumbling sideways. Someone dragged the girl to safety in the nick of time, and the horse dropped back, shaking and sweating; but Brock knew nothing of that—for by then he had fallen heavily from the saddle. He hit the ground with one leg twisted under him—and knew no more.

Darkness engulfed him like a tide, and he sank into it. Hours later—or was it days? or even weeks?—he seemed to come to himself once more.

He was being carried along by a score of willing hands. He could feel himself lurching and swaying from side to side. . . . He was a boy again, at home on the family farm in Wessex, and his brothers and some of the neighboring lads were hauling him off to their lair. That day they were playing at battles, and he had been taken prisoner. Now he was transported in a scrimmage of arms and legs, to their enemy headquarters. He wrestled and yelled, but he was hopelessly outnumbered. Laughing, they dragged him along, ignoring his protests.

"Shut your mouth, Brockie—you're our prisoner now, and nobody will save you!" they told him gleefully.

(And somehow, in some other time and place, Garnet walked alongside the litter, whitefaced but determined not to cry, saying, "Please take care—be very careful with him. He must be in such pain . . .")

A uniformed sergeant, in charge of the stretcher-party, said, "Don't you fret, ma'am. He'll be all right. . . . It's his leg, you see, he fell awkward. . . . But we'll see to him in the dressing tent. They've gone for a doctor now."

Cassie held Garnet's arm and supported her.

"He'll recover in no time, you wait. . . . I've seen a dozen such accidents on the hunting field, when I was employed by families with grown-up sons. These broken limbs mend like magic, believe me."

Garnet squeezed her hand and tried to smile.

"Dear Cassie . . . I'm glad you were here. . . ."

Young Brockie Savage had reached the unknown destination. Hidden among bushes and scrub, there was a small opening in the rocks—these Wessex hillsides were honeycombed with old caves—and now his captors pushed him through the cleft among the stones, headlong into pitch darkness.

"Pile some brushwood across the entrance and keep guard!" one of the boys shouted. "He'll not get out of there in a hurry . . ."

Brock picked himself up off the gravelly floor, rubbed his knees and elbows and waited for the next move.

"We can do nothing but wait for the doctor," said Cassie.

"I can't wait out here—I must be with him."

"Garnet—no, stay with me—"

Cassie tried to stop her, but Garnet was determined. She walked boldly into the riders' dressing tent, and announced, "I am going to sit with my husband until the doctor arrives."

There was a shocked reaction, a sudden scramble; a dozen young officers, in every stage of undress—one or two completely naked—stood frozen for an instant, then made a concerted dive for their clothes, at this unexpected invasion.

Garnet scarcely saw them; she had eyes only for the single figure lying stretched out upon the trestle table. She went straight to him, and took his hand, saying: "A chair, if you please."

A startled lieutenant, clad only in a silk shirt and socks, hastened to obey. Then Garnet sat by Brock's side, watched that pale, motionless face and waited.

Cassie had followed her into the tent, and a young lieutenant produced a second chair. He noticed that she was less single-minded than Mrs. Savage; her eyes darted left and right, surveying the scene swiftly and thoroughly. She saw all that was to be seen, and she let her lips curve ever so faintly at the discomfiture of the half-dressed officers.

She thanked the lieutenant politely, and as she took her place beside Garnet, she looked him up and down, quite frankly, and without any mock modesty.

The lieutenant felt himself growing hot, and hastened away to take refuge among his colleagues. No woman had ever scrutinized him in that way before,

and he was suddenly very much aware of his own physical attributes. . . . He pulled on his trousers quickly and tried to control the throbbing of his blood.)

Brock Savage wondered if there might be another exit to the cave that imprisoned him: so many of these underground tunnels opened into one another, and if he could somehow find an escape route, he could turn the tables on his captors.

With this in mind, he began to explore the depths of the cave, very cautiously, taking one step at a time as the ground sloped away under his feet, feeling his way along the narrowing walls. Gradually, the proportions of the cave diminished, and he felt the path leading downhill; he was stooping now—squatting—scrambling along on all fours—

And then he stopped dead. . . . He was not alone.

Immediately ahead, he heard someone breathing in the darkness, and the sweat turned to icewater along his spine.

"Who's there?" he asked, forcing his voice to remain steady.

There was a strangled sob, and a faint, female whisper replied: "It's me . . . Jessie. Who are you?"

He knew her at once—Jessie Pollard, one of the village girls, a blonde, apple-cheeked lass with long plaits. It was a favorite sport for the local boys to try to grab those swinging plaits and pull them cruelly.

"Brock Savage," he replied. "What are you doing here?"

"They took me prisoner too," she answered tearfully. "And I—I want to get out—I want to go home. I don't want to play this game no more."

"Get along then," urged Brock, crawling closer to the sound of her voice. "If we keep on this way, we might find another tunnel to lead us out again."

"That's what I thought, Master Brock—only—only I've got *stuck*. . . . I can't move."

"What?" He put out a hand, and found himself touching Jessie's knee.

She was old enough to wear her skirts long nowadays, but her struggles to crawl through the narrow tunnel must have tangled her clothes around her and rucked them up, for her legs were bare. Brock's hand closed upon her knee, and he let it stay there, without quite knowing why.

"What are we going to do?" Jessie whimpered. "My arms are up above my head—I got my head and shoulders through—and now I can't move forward or back . . ."

He did not reply. A curious thing seemed to be happening; there was a singing in his ears, and in the pitch darkness, his body appeared to have acquired a life of its own. Both his hands were grasping Jessie's legs now, and he began to breathe very much faster, as his fingers moved upward, exploring her thighs, sliding up the inside of her legs—

"Why, Master Brock, you stop that—stop it this minute, you bad boy! D'you hear me? . . . I never knew you was so wicked. Stop it, I tell you, for you know I'm unable to move—don't tickle me so—oh, please don't tickle."

Now he knew for sure that what his elder brothers had whispered to him was true. It was all true—the village girls did not wear anything under their skirts. And his fingers touched a wonderful, secret place, as soft as velvet, with the lightest fuzz of downy hair, and a warm, moist threshold that opened under his inquiring fingertips . . .

"Oh, Master Brock, shame on you—I'll die, oh, I'll die if you do that. I won't let you, I *won't*—"

And with one last convulsive wriggle she pulled her body away from him, and somehow squeezed through the narrow confines of the tunnel.

He felt bereft and miserable; and yet she had shown him the way of escape. He heard her calling back to him: "Once you're through it gets easier again. Follow me, Master Brock—come along . . ."

Brock lay full-length in the stony passage, and tried

to obey. He decided it might be easier to get through if he went feet first.

("It's a simple fracture, ma'am—nothing worse than that. I shall require splints and bandages to set the bone, and then you may take your husband home and put him to bed," said the army doctor. "He is going to need plenty of rest for the next few weeks.")

"Very well, Doctor." Garnet stood up. "I'll go and tell the coachman to bring our carriage around as soon as possible."

"I'll stay here—I may be able to help," said Cassie. "I've often assisted in the past, when one of my pupils required nursing. I'm not afraid."

"Indeed, miss?" The doctor regarded Cassie for a moment. "In that case, you can serve me by getting a pair of scissors or a sharp knife. The first thing we must do is cut him out of his boots and breeches.")

Going feet first proved to be less simple than Brock had expected.

He got his legs through easily enough, and his hips. He pushed down further, and then, at chest height, he found himself trapped. His arms were up, and the breadth of his shoulders became tightly wedged in the narrow passage.

"What's keeping you, Master Brock?" Jessie had returned, impatient to get away. "What are you waiting for?"

"The same as you, Jessie," Brock replied. "I seem to have got stuck as well."

"Have you now?" She gave a curious, muffled sound, and a moment later, Brock realized she was laughing.

"It's no joke," he began. "Pull my legs, can't you? See if you can get me free—"

"Oh, I'll give your legs a pull, never fear!" Jessie giggled. "Now p'raps you'll find out what it feels like, eh?"

With dismay, Brock realized too late what she meant.

He was just fourteen years old, and had only a

sketchy notion of the adult physical functions. He had seen the farm animals mating, of course, but the nearest he had ever come to sexuality was a game of Kiss-in-the-Ring at a Christmas party, with the vicar's two shy daughters.

So he was unprepared for the shameless, intrusive touch of Jessie's hands now as they explored his thighs and slowly but surely proceeded to unbutton his pantaloons. He protested—he roared—he wriggled, but to no avail. And the more he wriggled, the tighter he seemed to be stuck in that rocky prison. And the more Jessie's fingers invaded his privacy, the tighter his loins became. He felt as if all the blood in his body was rushing into his groin, as if he were swelling there, growing larger and larger until he feared he might explode . . .

Still she proceeded, determined to have her revenge. First his knickerbockers were dragged down round his knees, and then his skimpy drawers. As he felt these last defenses being torn from him, he thrust to and fro with his hips in a vain attempt to avoid her groping fingers, but she was merciless.

There in the total darkness, as his heart pounded and he felt he would suffocate with excitement, he discovered a whole new world of sensations that he had never even guessed at.

She tickled him, teased him, tormented him, and her wicked hands moved faster and faster, while he panted and groaned in ecstasy. He felt himself losing control; his body was taking charge of him and he could not stop it. Something overpoweringly strange and wonderful was about to happen at any second—he couldn't breathe, he couldn't speak, he couldn't stop himself, he could only—

He uttered a long, shuddering cry . . .

And opened his eyes, to find himself staring up into a pair of cool gray eyes with long black lashes. Jessie merged into Cassie, and he came to, at last . . .

"That's better," said Cassie, very gently. "That's much better. . . . How are you feeling now?"

"I—I've been—what happened?" he asked, huskily, trying to look about him. He realized that they were inside the marquee, and that they were alone.

"You were thrown from your horse, and your right leg is fractured; but the doctor has set it in a splint, and I helped as best I could. . . . You're going to be all right now," she replied.

He began to remember, the pain in his head—but that had almost gone now, and his body felt curiously rested; warm and comfortable, as in a dream. . . . He *had* been dreaming—that strange boyhood adventure, when he and Jessie escaped from a cave . . . God in heaven, why should he suddenly remember something that happened over thirty years ago?

"Where's Garnet?" he asked abruptly.

"She's gone to bring around the carriage. We're going to take you home. You have to rest."

"My leg doesn't hurt at all. I feel almost—relaxed."

"That's because the doctor gave you something to take away the pain. Then he left me to finish bandaging you."

Brock lifted his head and glanced down at himself as he lay upon the wooden table—and discovered with a shock that he was naked below the waist. His shirt was pulled up over his stomach, and his private parts were barely covered by a crumpled towel: apart from that, he wore nothing upon his lower limbs—nothing but a stiff contraption of wood and bandages on his right leg.

"We had to cut away your clothes, you see," Cassie explained.

Brock said nothing. He had suddenly become aware that beneath the skimpy towel, he was in a state of intense sexual arousal, the legacy, he supposed, of that dream of darkness. . . . And he realized with certainty that Cassie was equally aware of it.

OLD WORLD

How long had they been alone together like this? How much did she know about him now, that she had not known before? He looked into her eyes again; and she smiled slightly.

"You were dreaming," she said.

Chapter Seven

HOMECOMING

From that moment on, Brock's mind was made up.

He would not stay in Paris a day longer than he had to. As soon as he was strong and well again—as soon as he was literally back on his feet—he would throw up the job he had been struggling to do, and return home to England.

A few weeks later, when Brock was able to get about, he told Garnet that he had requested an interview with the Duke of Wellington; and he set off with an expression of grim determination, leaning upon a stout walking stick. It was not until he returned to the Rue de Rivoli some hours later that he revealed his purpose to his wife.

"Give me a brandy, for the love of heaven," he said, flopping down into a delicate French armchair that looked as if it might splinter beneath him.

"You look tired. . . . How is your leg? Is it giving you much pain?"

"No more than usual. I can put up with that . . . thank you."

He took the brandy glass and inhaled the bouquet for a moment, before tasting it. "That's better than all the tomfool medicines in the world. . . . If I look tired, it's because I have had a battle."

"A battle? Not with the Duke?"

"Who else? I told him what I wanted. He wouldn't hear of it, but I stuck to my guns. He ranted—I roared—and at last I won. . . . I got my way, but it was a tough, uphill fight."

OLD WORLD

He took another swig of brandy.

"I don't understand. What were you fighting about?"

"We're going home, my love. We've been away far too long already—I've had enough of this diplomatic life; I'm not cut out for it."

"You requested a transfer? Oh, Brock, where?"

"Not a transfer. There's nowhere for me to transfer to, now this confounded war's at an end, and I'm not a peacetime soldier. . . . I've resigned my commission."

She turned and stared at him, unable to believe her ears. There was a long moment of silence. Then she asked quietly, "Are you sure that is what you want?"

"Come here. . . . No, come closer than that. Give me a kiss, woman."

The little French chair creaked dangerously, as she perched upon his good knee.

At last she said, "If it's really what you want, then it's what I want too. But I hope you're very, very sure."

"Dearest Garnet—I want you, and I want our daughter, and I want to be at home with the pair of you. That's all I need, nothing else—and no one else."

"No one else?"

He pulled her head down to his shoulder, stroking her hair, remembering how it had felt, four years ago—close-cropped, boyish curls. Then he twined her silky tresses around his fingers and thanked God with all his heart for his good fortune.

"You are my wife and you are all the world to me. . . . Boy—woman—companion—best of friends. And my love—always."

"Oh, Brock . . ." She put up her lips to his again, and then added, "But what about Cassie—?"

She felt his muscles tauten very slightly, but his voice was easy as he replied, "Once we return to England, I've no doubt Miss Mayne will be able to find

another post, soon enough. I'm sure you will give her an excellent reference."

"Yes, of course. . . . Only—"

She would have continued, but he put his finger to her lips.

"Ssh! Let's have no argument, my love. Miss Mayne would be out of place at Rosewood. We have a large staff of servants to wait upon us already—and I am sure such an enterprising young woman would not wish to bury herself in the country. She needs a post that can make use of all her remarkable abilities."

"I suppose that's true. But it seems a pity. I shall miss her, Brock."

"You won't have time to miss her once we're settled. You'll be far too busy looking after me—and Ivory."

She laughed, and hugged him.

"I do believe you're actually jealous of the time I spend with Cassie! You want me all to yourself."

"Why, of course. Have I ever denied it? . . . I want you—" He nibbled the lobe of her ear very gently, and his hands found and fondled her breasts. "All. . . . All to myself."

So it was arranged. As soon as the necessary documents could be made out and signed, Major-General Broccard Savage was to become plain Mr. B. Savage, Esquire, of Rosewood Hall in the County of Surrey; and Garnet broke the news of the impending move to Cassie.

She took her dismissal very calmly.

"I always knew that we should have to go our separate ways sooner or later," she said philosophically. "I won't pretend I'm not sad, for I am—but our futures lie in different directions, and there's an end to it."

"Dear Cassie, you've been more than a companion. You've been a very good friend to me," said Garnet. "And that's something that can still continue, surely? We'll keep in touch. We shall write to one another."

"Oh, yes . . ." Cassie smiled ruefully. "One always says that, but somehow one never does. The letters

OLD WORLD

get fewer and further between. I swore I'd keep up a correspondence with poor Lady Hartletop, but I haven't heard a word from her since January, and *that* was only a few scrawled lines to wish me a merry Christmas, a month too late."

"But I'm not Lady Hartletop," said Garnet firmly. "And we shall not lose sight of one another. . . . Besides, you must come to Rosewood sometimes, when you have a holiday, and stay with us."

"I don't think the major-general would care for that," Cassie pointed out shrewdly. "He and I have never exactly hit it off, you know."

"Oh, what nonsense!" Garnet exclaimed in exasperation. "It's just that you don't really know one another very well. . . . He's the kindest of men, and you're the best of women. I'm quite sure one day you will understand each other, and then you will both be friends. In fact, I shall not be content until that happens!"

"Well . . . we shall see." Cassie did not pursue this topic. "In any case, when do you return to Rosewood? And when must I start looking about for another post?"

"We do not plan to return directly to Surrey. First of all, Brock has some business to attend to in London. The Duke is sending him back with some confidential dispatches for the Prince Regent. Think of it, Cassie! My husband, having an audience with Prince George himself! And we plan to stay at a hotel for a few days. We shall keep you with us until our stay in London is over. I thought that would give you the best chance to find a new employer."

Cassie looked at her, with her head on one side, and said oddly, "You really are an extraordinary person . . . you actually consider other people's interests, as well as your own."

"Well—yes, I suppose so . . . don't you? Doesn't everyone?" asked Garnet. "I mean, when the people are one's best friends . . ."

"I couldn't tell you. I've never made a habit of collecting friends, till now."

After that, everything seemed to happen very quickly. The apartments at the Rue de Rivoli were vacated, and the Savage family made their way back to England, with their luggage following on in a little fleet of coaches.

The Channel crossing was calm and uneventful. The next day, they arrived in London, and put up at Fellowes Hotel in Audley Street, in a sunny, spacious set of rooms upon the first floor, overlooking a little private garden. Upon the following morning, Cassie set out for an interview with an educational employment agency, which specialized in placing tutors and governesses with well-bred—and well-endowed—county families.

At almost the same hour, Brock had an appointment at Carlton House, to present himself to the Prince. Upon his arrival, he was ushered into a large ante-room; he handed over his credentials, and was asked to wait.

He spent an uncomfortable quarter of an hour alone, feeling very uncertain of himself, and wishing he could remember all the rules of court etiquette. All he knew for certain was that he should call His Royal Highness "sir"—and that he should on no account turn his back upon him, even when retiring from the room. Apart from that, he was not at all sure what to expect.

At last an equerry came to find him, and led the way to the Prince's private dressing room.

Brock stepped in and was almost dazzled for a moment by the glare of light. A hundred candles flickered on every side, and their flames were doubled and trebled in countless reflections from all the mirrors that lined the walls. Uniforms and waistcoats of all colors were hung here and there or lay carelessly draped over the backs of the furniture. The whole room sparkled with jewels—decorations, orders, breastpins that glittered with a rainbow brilliance—and there,

OLD WORLD

surrounded by wigs, perfume bottles, pillboxes and jars of ointment, sat the First Gentleman of Europe—the Prince Regent himself.

He raised a fat hand in greeting, and exclaimed cordially, "Come in, Savage. Come in, don't stand on ceremony. . . . Tell me all the latest gossip from Paris!"

When Cassie returned from her interview, Garnet was looking out at the little garden below the hotel windows and watching the faint, first sign of autumn—a single leaf that was curling back and turning yellow. Soon the summer would be over.

She heard Cassie enter the room, and hurried to her, eager for news.

"Well—?" Then the smile died upon her lips, as Cassie shook her head, taking off her bonnet and turning away. "You had no luck?"

"They said there is nothing for me at the moment. If I wait, perhaps later in the year they may be able to find me a place. . . . But there's no knowing how long that may be. And I can't afford to wait."

Garnet put her arms around her friend's waist, impulsively, and said, "Don't look so anxious. We'll think of something—"

They were still talking over various plans—some improbable, some well-nigh impossible—when Brock came back from Carlton House. Cassie rose to her feet, ready to withdraw and leave her employers alone together, but Garnet stopped her.

"No, don't run away, Cassie. We must talk to Brock, he will know what's best to be done in this situation, I'm sure. Brock, my love, sit down and give us your good advice."

Then she saw that he was hardly listening to her. He looked like a man who had just received a great shock.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "What's happened? Didn't you see the Prince?"

"Oh, yes—I saw him." Brock spoke as if he were in

a daze. "I passed on all my reports from Paris, and he seemed to be very gratified. We had a long talk."

"What did I tell you, Cassie? My husband is a famous man—a favorite at Court! So you've concluded all your business in London?"

"I think so. But His Royal Highness had some business to transact with me, too—business I was not expecting."

Brock paced the room, going over the amazing events of the morning in his mind, and re-creating them.

"He had learned from the Duke's dispatches that I was no longer serving as an officer, and he said he was sorry to hear of it—but of course it was for me to make the decision, and he would not try to persuade me to change my mind. . . . Then he went on to say that I had done well for the country in these past years, and he was gracious enough to add that he—and our country—were both in my debt. . . ."

"Oh, Brock, what an honor!" Garnet exclaimed.

"An honor indeed—for with that he called his equerry to hand him a sword and he made me kneel down—on one knee only, for I still can't bend the other—and then, then—"

He shook his head, as if he could still hardly believe it himself. He turned to Garnet, and suddenly he was smiling broadly.

"I'm not a major-general any longer, my dear, but I'm not plain Mr. Savage either. . . . I'm Sir Brocard now—and you're a ladyship!"

She stared at him speechlessly, and then flung herself into his arms, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, but Brock was laughing openly.

"Isn't it a rum go? Here am I, a West Country yeomen who's never had much time for titles and such—and in one minute I'm transformed into what they're pleased to call the nobility!" He laughed again, hugging his wife, and added: "We must celebrate. We'll go out into the town, and you shall buy a new gown—or a coach and pair—or a diamond neck-

OLD WORLD

lace. . . . Whatever you have set your heart on, my dearest girl—only say the word, and it's yours!"

"Oh, Brock—*Sir Brock!*" Now she was laughing too, and she clung to him giddily. "Do you really mean it? I can have whatever I want most of all? Then, you have solved all our problems, for I want Cassie to come and stay with us at Rosewood, for as long as she pleases. . . . And she will not have to worry about finding a new post after all!"

There was a pause. Garnet looked into his face, and found that he was laughing no longer but looked grave and troubled. She tried to restore his good humor by teasing him.

"Come—you can't go back on your word! For we both heard you say it. I have a witness. . . . You promised me I could have my heart's desire—you cannot refuse me now!"

Brock's eyes met Cassie's long, level gaze, as he answered Garnet:

"I can refuse you nothing. . . . Very well, my love—you shall have your wish—and Miss Mayne is welcome to join us at Rosewood."

Cassie bowed her head meekly, and said, "Your wife told me that you are the kindest of men, *Sir Broccard*. And now I see that she did not exaggerate. I am extremely grateful for your generosity."

Calmly, she moved away, and Brock watched her as she left the room, her back as straight as a ramrod, and her head held high . . . and—for some unaccountable reason—he shivered.

The return of *Sir Broccard* and Lady Savage to Rosewood Hall, accompanied by their baby daughter and Miss Cassandra Mayne, was a happy homecoming indeed. The countryside had never looked lovelier, and the golden haze of September lay upon the fields of the home farm. The last roses of summer bloomed as never before, almost as if they knew that this was to be their farewell appearance.

ROSEWOOD

Once they had unpacked all the luggage, and Garnet had exchanged all their news with Mrs. Bolt, she hurried around the house and grounds, giving Cassie a guided tour of the estate.

"There is the rose garden, and through there, beyond the hedge, is the orchard—it will soon be time for fruitpicking—but let's go indoors again, for I've so much to show you."

They toured the house exhaustively. Cassie admired the drawing room and the dining room, and smiled wryly at the deserted schoolroom ("Just fancy, you will be able to give Ivory her first lessons here one of these days!"), and then they mounted to the upper floors.

"This used to be my old bedroom, Cassie, but now I want you to have it. . . . For Brock and I are being moved into the master bedroom, now my father is gone. This shall be your very own room, and you must change it however you wish and rearrange the furniture to your own tastes. . . . It's nice and private; I always liked being here on my own, away from everyone else . . . not that there are likely to be many other people in the house; for we do not entertain a great deal."

Cassie examined the bedroom and pronounced it to be quite perfect. She was sure she would be very happy here.

But although Garnet had warned her not to expect much in the way of company, the following day they were all due for a surprise. They were sitting over luncheon, in the dining room, with the windows open on to the flowering gardens at the back of the house; and they had reached the dessert when they heard the sound of carriage wheels upon the gravel drive.

"Visitors?" Brock raised an eyebrow, as he pared a peach.

"We're not expecting anyone, are we?" Garnet was puzzled. "I suppose the neighbors have heard of our return. Perhaps someone has called to leave a card."

OLD WORLD

"Shall I go and see?" Cassie offered, half-rising from her chair.

But before Garnet could answer her, they heard a shrill cry from the front of the house. Mrs. Bolt's voice was like the squeak of a slate pencil, as she exclaimed loudly:

"My Jem, my blessed son—home again! . . . Oh, heaven be praised!"

And they heard her fall into a storm of weeping.

Now it was Garnet's turn to rise and push back her chair.

"It's Jem Bolt!" she explained to Brock. "How very extraordinary. I thought he was in America. The last time I saw him, he was serving there as a naval seaman . . ."

She hurried from the room, her thoughts in a whirl. She was glad that Mrs. Bolt would be reunited with her son, of course. But when she remembered all that had passed between her and Jem, she could not help wishing he had stayed where he was, half the world away. Cassie and Brock followed her, a little more slowly, to discover the reason for this unexpected arrival.

As Garnet stepped quickly out of the front door under the main entrance portico, the afternoon sun hit her full in the face, and she stopped short, blinking.

Jem Bolt, trim, clean-shaven, dressed in a bottle-green tailcoat that fitted him like a livery, was in the act of unloading luggage from the roof of a hired coach. He looked up and saw Garnet, and as their eyes met, he flushed crimson, a slow stain spreading across his face. She put her hand up to her cheek, fearing to betray her emotion by an answering blush.

But Mrs. Bolt gave them no chance to show embarrassment. Mopping her streaming eyes with the corner of her apron, she sobbed: "Oh, Miss Garnet ma'am—your ladyship—look who's here! My own Jem—my boy—safe and well—home from foreign parts . . . and me not knowing if he was alive or dead."

ROSEWOOD

Conscious of Brock at her shoulder, Garnet moistened her lips and said carefully, "I'm pleased to see you, Jem. Welcome back to Rosewood . . . but can all that luggage really belong to you?"

"No, miss . . . missus. 'Tis the luggage for the whole family, for I'm in service now—"

Jem fumbled with the handle of the carriage door and opened it—and to Garnet's amazement and joy, out stepped her brother.

"Gerard—oh, how wonderful! I never thought, never dreamed. Why didn't you let us know?"

But Gerard had turned to assist the remaining passengers to alight—a slim, beautiful girl with copper-colored curls and deep green eyes, and a chuckling fairheaded child, about three or four years old.

"Allow me to introduce you," said Gerard. "My sister, Garnet—my wife, Coral. And the youngest of the family, Master Blaise."

Garnet and Coral moved toward one another slowly, like two figures in an age-old ritual, their hands outstretched. They clasped in greeting and gazed at each other for a long moment.

"Coral . . . I am so very pleased to meet you at last, for I have heard Brock speak of you. You met my husband, I believe, at New Orleans?"

"Indeed I did. . . . Good day to you, sir. I hope you are well?"

Brock came down the stone steps with a little difficulty on account of his stiff leg, and shook hands warmly with his sister-in-law.

"Very well, thank you, Mrs. Mallory," he said. "And all the better for seeing you again."

"And this is Blaise?" Garnet dropped to her knees upon the gravel, to shake the little boy solemnly by the hand. "How do you do, Blaise?"

She was trying to work out some simple arithmetic in her head. Surely Brock had said that when he met Coral Maguire last Christmas, she and Gerard were

OLD WORLD

about to get married. And yet this handsome child could not be less than three years old—

Guessing something of what was in Garnet's mind, Coral said quickly, "Blaise is my sister's boy, but we have adopted him as our own."

"Oh? How interesting . . ." Garnet stood up, dusting down her skirt, thinking: *There's something odd there—but we'll worry about that later.*

At the same instant, Coral thought: *She's every bit as proud and stuck-up as I knew she'd be. It's easy to see that she's no time for me!*

But Garnet was continuing cheerfully to Gerard, "All the same, you made one mistake when you said that Blaise was the youngest in the family—for Brock and I now have a daughter, Ivory, just four and a half months old. You shall see her presently."

While Gerard and Coral expressed their congratulations, and Jem proceeded to unload the coach, the little party was moving into the house when Garnet suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, how remiss of me. Forgive me, Cassie, I should have introduced you. My brother Gerard and his wife, this is Cassandra Mayne, our very good friend."

Cassie dipped an automatic curtsy, and Gerard bowed over her hand, saying, "I am charmed to make your acquaintance, Miss Mayne."

"The pleasure is mine entirely, Mr. Mallory."

They looked each other full in the face and smiled, mutually intrigued.

Coral felt a sudden pang of stupid jealousy. Who was this cool, elegant beauty who seemed so much at home here? And what did Gerard mean by smiling at her in that infuriating way? But Garnet was leading them through into the dining room and calling Mrs. Bolt to send up a second assorting of dishes.

"You'll have lunch with us of course. You must be famished after the journey. Do tell me, Gerard, how long are you planning to stay?"

"To stay?" He repeated the words blankly, then

grinned. "Why, we've no plans to go anywhere else. After all, sister dear, this is my home too, you know . . ." He looked around, and saw that the table had only been laid for three. "But where's Father? Isn't he eating with you today? Is he up in his room?"

At the door Mrs. Bolt sniffed loudly and put her apron to her eyes again, escaping from the room. Garnet moved toward Gerard, as if she meant to embrace him, then stopped awkwardly.

"I'm sorry I must tell you this so brutally, but there is no other way of breaking the news. Father died a few months ago, just after Ivory was born. He had suffered one stroke already, and the second one proved to be fatal. It was all over very quickly."

There was a long silence. Everyone watched Gerard's face.

He took a few steps away from them all, trying to adjust to this sudden shock. He reached the dining table and turned, his hand on the back of the carving chair at the table's head—the chair that Sir George used to sit in.

Almost automatically, he pulled the chair out and settled himself in it. At last he spoke, looking straight ahead.

"I wish I'd known. . . . I'd like to have seen the old man once more, before. . . . Well—it's too late now."

Coral forgot everyone else in the room. She did not give a fig for her grand new relations. She went straight to her husband and stood behind his chair, putting her hands on his shoulders in a simple gesture of comfort and sympathy.

Gerard nodded, acknowledging her presence. Then he said, "How very strange. . . . It's going to take time to get used to the idea."

"Of father's death?" Garnet asked.

"That, of course, but everything else too . . . the responsibility." Suddenly he frowned and turned to stare at Garnet. "What the devil did you mean by asking

OLD WORLD

how long I plan to stay? This is my place—I'm master of Rosewood now—"

Garnet glanced up at Brock, but he could not help her. This was something she had to do alone.

She crossed to her brother, and knelt before him, taking his hands in hers.

"Dear Gerard, I'm so very sorry. . . . Before he died, Father had changed his will. He left the house, the estate—everything—to me, and my children . . ."

She looked up into his face: he was completely expressionless.

But Coral's feelings were all too clear. Anger and defiance blazed in her green eyes, and her chin lifted dangerously, as the two women stared at one another—face to face.

It was not an easy moment for any of them.

Part Three



Old Moon

Chapter One

SILHOUETTES

The next few days flew by very fast. When Garnet looked back upon this period afterward, she found it hard to remember the events in sequence. She seemed unable to recall anything except sudden, distinct moments, caught and cut out with startling clarity, like silhouettes . . .

When she was a child, and her father sometimes allowed her to go to the village fair, she had always been fascinated to watch the silhouette maker at work. He set up his booth within the white canvas walls of a small tent, and shone a bright light upon each sitter, throwing up the shadow of a profile. Then he got to work so rapidly that his fingers seemed to twinkle as he plied his scissors—cutting, snipping, paring away the flimsy black paper until everything else had been discarded and he was left with a miniature replica of that profile, to be stuck onto a mount and pinned down under glass forever, like a fly in amber.

But silhouette portraits always had to be in profile, gazing off to one side, never able to present themselves full face to your gaze.

So it was, Garnet decided, with her memories of the days that followed the arrival of Gerard, Coral and little Blaise. It was as if the Fates had been at work with their scissors, presenting the people of Rosewood in a series of sharp-edged profiles, unable to look at one another . . .

She could still see, in her mind's eye, Gerard's expression as she told him that he had been disinherited:

ROSEWOOD

his head lifted, almost defiantly, gazing off into the distance, determined not to betray his feelings. And she remembered how Coral had stood behind him—her beautiful features sharp-edged and clear against the light, transfixed in that moment of time.

It must have been some hours later that Garnet found her brother alone—in the schoolroom, of all places, where they had passed so much of their childhood together. He looked like a boy again, for he had found an old penknife inside one of the desks—a treasured possession long ago, now with a rusty, broken blade—and he sat with his shoulders hunched, concentrating upon the task of gouging his initials in the ink stained wood.

“Gerard . . .”

She closed the door quietly behind her. He did not look up.

“I am sorry. I think I gave you the bad news thoughtlessly, cruelly . . . I never meant to tell you like that.”

He shrugged, still intent on his occupation, remarking, “Our arrival was a shock for you too—I realize that . . . I should have sent word. I should have warned you. Perhaps it would have been better if I had not come here at all.”

“Don’t say that!” She moved to the desk, and put her hand on his. He stopped fidgeting, and sat very still, as she continued: “Now Papa and Mama are gone, you are all the family I have left. . . . Of course you had to come here. This is still your home.”

“We each have our own family now. And it is not my home, but yours; Father made that perfectly clear.”

“Your family and mine are one and the same. This is home to us all, for as long as you wish to stay here.”

“As your guests? Sponging upon you?”

He looked up at last, and his eyes were blazing. She tightened her hold upon him, feeling his knuckles taut and hard beneath her fingers.

“No, Gerard! It’s not like that—it will never be like that. . . . We’ve always shared everything, haven’t we?”

OLD MOON

We'll go on sharing, you'll see. Don't worry about it, I'll talk to Brock. We'll work something out, I'm sure."

"I'm much obliged to you, and to Sir Broccard. But we shall not make ourselves a burden on you for very long. As soon as I have formed some new plans, Coral and I will take ourselves off—to Ireland, perhaps."

"Please don't talk of going away, Gerard. I love you . . . don't you know that?"

He stared at her and saw that she was speaking the truth. Gradually, his expression softened to a wry smile.

"Dear Garnet, dear sister . . . what a mess we have got ourselves into, to be sure . . ."

She wanted very much to kiss him, to seal this moment with an embrace, but he stood up abruptly and walked to the window, snapping shut the little penknife and slipping it into his pocket. He stared out at the garden, which lay in a blaze of sunshine, and repeated under his breath, "What a mess . . ."

Outside, Blaise played upon the lawn, chasing a woolly ball across the grass. He, at least, had no cares. A few yards away, Coral stood at the open door of the conservatory, watching the boy. She was startled to hear a voice close behind her.

"I came in to cut some peaches for dessert. Would Master Blaise care for one, do you suppose?"

Coral turned. Inside the greenhouse, the blonde young woman with gray eyes was smiling at her. She was some sort of companion to Gerard's sister—what was her name, now?

"That's kind of you, miss—er—"

"My name is Mayne, but please call me Cassie. The family are very generous. They treat me almost like an equal, you see."

Coral frowned. "And why should they not? I would think the worse of them if they treated you any other way."

"Oh, well, I'm only a hanger-on in the household, after all. Companions and governesses are neither fish,

ROSEWOOD

fowl nor good red herring. Somewhere in between the gentry and the servants, and at home in neither category."

Cassie spoke gaily, as if it were a good joke, but Coral was not amused.

"Then it's all the more shame to those who keep up these stupid distinctions." She entered the glasshouse, and was immediately struck by the wave of heat that had been stored up there. Tiny beads of sweat moistened the back of her hand, as she stretched out to take the peach Cassie offered her. "Thank you very much . . . Blaise will enjoy that."

"Are you and Mr. Mallory proposing to make an extended stay at Rosewood?" Cassie asked politely.

"I don't know. My husband's notions have been turned topsy-turvy by the news of his father's will. . . . I don't know what he will do."

"I've no doubt that our host and hostess will be only too pleased for you to make yourselves comfortable here for as long as you wish."

"*Comfortable?*" Coral stroked the soft fuzz of the peach skin, still hot from the sunshine, and said, "Comfort's not important. . . . It's peace of mind that matters; and we'll never have that as long as we're living under this roof—under the patronage of our aristocratic relations!"

"I see. . . . Well, it's different for me, of course, since I have no alternative. Perhaps you have never known what it is like, to be really poor. Completely dependent on other people's kindness."

"Indeed I've known poverty, Miss Mayne. I beg your pardon—Cassie. And like you, I've had to earn my own living. But one thing I have never done is accept charity—and that I will never do!"

Cassie's eyes widened, as she said, "Mrs. Mallory, I admire your fortitude."

"It's nothing admirable, I promise you. It's stubborn, hot-headed Irish independence. . . . And for heaven's

OLD MOON

sake let's not be formal with one another. My name's Coral!"

Cassie dimpled, acknowledging this, and replied, "Very well, Coral . . . I'm very glad you have come to Rosewood, and I hope you won't run away too soon, for I would like us to be friends."

"And so we shall be. Indeed there's not another soul in the place I can talk to frankly. I'm sure the family despise me, and the servants are no better. Tell me, Cassie, I've a pile of washing that needs to be done; you know what it's like when you've been traveling. Where I can get hold of a bowl of hot water and some soap?"

Garnet was in the nursery, giving Ivory her evening feed, when Cassie joined her. As always, the soothing, timeless ritual had a soporific affect upon her, and she looked up almost drowsily from the baby at her breast.

"Hello, Cassie. Come and sit down by me. Where is everyone? What has been happening?"

"I can't tell you that. The men are off on their own, I fancy. I saw both your husband and your brother striding out of the house earlier."

"Oh, good. They were going for a walk together? I'm very glad."

"No, not together," Cassie corrected her. "They were setting out in different directions. From the look of them, I believe they each preferred to be alone with their own thoughts."

"Oh, dear." Garnet sighed. "I do so want them to get to know one another. I'm sure once Gerard understands that Brock and I only want to *help*—"

"Your brother does not choose to be helped, perhaps," remarked Cassie. "Some people are very odd about such things. I suspect his wife may encourage him in that frame of mind, too."

"Gerard's wife? How do you mean?"

"Oh . . . I suppose I shouldn't repeat this, since she spoke to me in confidence but it did strike me as very

ROSEWOOD

peculiar. She actually asked me to provide her with soap and water, so she could wash her own clothes!"

"*Coral*, doing the laundry—?" Garnet was wide-awake now.

"She seems absolutely determined. I told her the maids would take care of it, but she would not have that. She insists on doing all the washing for herself, her husband, and the child."

"Well, that seems a little eccentric, I agree."

"I thought it seemed something more than that. The word that occurred to me was—ungrateful. She doesn't wish to be under any obligation to you, apparently. She puts it down to her Irish temperament. I'd describe it myself as bad temper!"

Garnet raised her eyebrows.

"Thank you for telling me, Cassie. I hadn't realized that my sister-in-law felt quite so strongly . . ."

When Gerard returned from his walk, and entered his own bedroom, which he now shared with Coral, he stared at her incredulously.

The pretty toilet articles had been removed from the dressing table. An old towel had been spread over its polished surface, and on the towel was a wooden tub full of hot water. Coral, with her sleeves rolled up above the elbows, was about to plunge in and tackle the family wash.

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"What does it look as if I'm doing?" she retorted. "You may as well slip off that shirt you're wearing, while we're at it. There's a nasty stain just below the collar."

"That was Blaise. I picked him up when he'd been eating a ripe peach, and he had juice all over his fingers." Gerard explained. "But that's not the point. You shouldn't be doing the laundry, my dear girl. . . . You're my wife, not one of the washerwomen!"

"You know I prefer to do it myself," said Coral, scrubbing away energetically at a pair of Blaise's

OLD MOON

socks. "It won't take many minutes and this is a good drying day."

"Don't be absurd!" said Gerard. "Give it all to the servants—they're paid to wait upon us."

"Not on me, they're not. . . . Besides, I'm not letting those saucy girls pick through our wardrobe. They'd be quick to notice that some of our clothes aren't of the finest quality, and snigger at us behind our backs."

"I never heard such rubbish!" Gerard was beginning to get angry. "Are you complaining that I haven't spent enough money to buy you fine silks and satins, is that it?"

"Of course not! I never said that." She whirled around to face him.

"It's what it sounded like. . . . Stop being so foolish and get rid of that tub of water. Tomorrow I'll see that all our linen is taken off to be laundered in the usual way."

Coral's eyes flashed fire. "This *is* the usual way. You've never grumbled at me for doing your washing until today!"

"We're at home now! You don't do such things here!"

"Then I wish I were somewhere else." Suddenly, her face crumpled, and she flung herself at Gerard, unfolding him in her wet, soapy arms. "Oh, dearest love, let's not stay here another day. . . . Let's go off to Ireland, and be happy!"

But he would not relax in her embrace. He stood like a rock, disapproving and unyielding.

"Coral, please be sensible . . . this is my home—my family. We must stay here for a while; it's expected of us. . . . And while we are here, we are expected to behave like conventional people. Leave the domestic duties to the servants, and remember you are my wife!"

She drew back and looked at him, her eyes glistening with tears.

"I'm not likely to forget it," she said.

In another part of the building, Garnet was arguing

too. Brock had come home from his walk, and now lay upon the bed to rest. She could tell that his leg was giving him some trouble, and she sat beside him, massaging his thigh and trying to draw the aches and pains from his weary muscles.

"You walked too far. The doctor warned you not to try and do too much. You have to be patient, and take things slowly."

"Perhaps. . . . It feels better when you do that." He stretched his limbs and smiled. "What would I do without you, Lady Savage?"

Garnet continued to stroke and soothe the knotted tendons, saying, "You will never have to do without me—just as I will never do without you. We need one another."

He watched her as her hands moved over him, in a steady rhythm, and admired the long, curving line of her neck and shoulders, the way the candlelight glinted upon her hair. And he felt a growing warmth spreading through his loins.

"I need you—now," he said softly. "Take off your clothes, Garnet, and lie down with me."

"I'm trying to help you to feel better," she objected. "This isn't a game!"

"It's a very good game. . . . And you're making me feel better every minute," Brock replied. He put his arm around her, trying to pull her down on to the bed.

"Brock! I told you—you must be patient!" she protested, wriggling out of his grasp. "Let me finish what I'm doing. . . ."

"How can I be patient when you're filling me with wild and wonderful thoughts? I want you, Garnet. . . . I want your mouth, I want your body—"

"Time enough for that later," she said firmly, keeping out of his reach. "And besides—I want to talk to you very seriously. . . . about Gerard."

Brock groaned, and shut his eyes. "What about Gerard?"

"I'm worried about him—and about Coral, too."

OLD MOON

They both seem so unhappy in the present situation, and I feel as if I'd cheated them somehow."

"My darling, you're talking nonsense. It's not *your* fault that Sir George changed his will. They can't possibly blame you for that."

"They don't blame me, but—they resent it. They're both proud and independent, quite amazingly so. Cassie was telling me . . ."

"Cassie?" Brock's eyes opened. "What has she been saying?"

"Nothing of any importance, but she's talked to Coral, and . . . well, I know how important it is for Coral and Gerard not to feel they're living here on sufferance. That's why I want you to advise me what to do."

"Do? I don't follow you."

"Well . . . isn't there some way we could draw up a new settlement of the property? Divide everything equally between Gerard and me? If only I could share it with him, just as we used to share things when we were children."

Brock sat up and took his wife in his arms.

"You're a child still. . . . You've no notion of the legal complications such a move would create. Your father's will was quite explicit; you cannot possibly hope to overturn it or set it aside without causing the most almighty confusion. There would be lawyers arguing all the way from here to Lincoln's Inn and back again if you attempted it. . . . The entire estate would be swallowed up in paying their fees, I shouldn't wonder!"

"Oh, Brock . . . it's so *difficult*. I want everyone to be happy!"

He began to unfasten the laces of her bodice, and his mouth sought hers, as he whispered, "Let's begin by making just two people happy—you and me. . . ." And he drew her into a long, passionate kiss.

As they broke apart, Garnet began to murmur weakly, "Yes, but Brock, I'm being serious—"

ROSEWOOD

"So am I," he whispered, reaching out to extinguish the candle. "I was never more serious in my life . . ."

The next day was Sunday, and by ten o'clock it was clear that they were in for another dry, cloudless day. The early morning haze had disappeared, and when Coral came out of the house with Blaise, the sun was already hot and the air shimmered above the gravel drive.

"Do we *have* to?" asked the little boy plaintively.

"Of course we do. We go to Mass every Sunday morning. You know that," said Coral firmly.

"Why?"

"Because God says so, that's why. Now come along, there's a good boy, and let's have no more arguments."

"Is it a long way away?" he wanted to know.

"Now how can I tell you that? Aren't I a stranger here myself? We're lucky to find a good Catholic chapel at all in a foreign country like England! And we're lucky to have a fine carriage and pair to take us there."

As she spoke, there was the clatter of hooves and the trundling of wheels, as the Rosewood carriage came into sight around the corner from the stables. Gerard was sitting up on the box next to the coachman, and he jumped down as they drew to a halt below the steps.

"Here you are. In you get, both of you. I've given instructions to wait till your church service is over, then bring you back again."

"Thank you, Gerard," said Coral flatly.

He opened the door, and lifted Blaise up, then handed Coral in to the coach. She looked back at him, and added, hesitantly, "I wish you'd change your mind and come with us . . ."

"Some other day, perhaps. Not now," said Gerard.

"Are you afraid to be seen by the neighbors going to a Roman chapel? Is that it?" she asked.

"Of course not. But you know I've not much time

OLD MOON

for such things. Now be off with you or you'll be late. I'll see you both at luncheon."

"Please, why doesn't Papa come too? I mean—Uncle Gerard—" Blaise wanted to know, pressing his nose against the carriage window.

"Because he's got other things to do. Just sit yourself down and stop asking so many questions."

"What has he got to do?" Blaise persisted, staring at Gerard.

"Oh, plenty of things, my lad . . . you'd be surprised. For instance—" Gerard looked about him for inspiration, and his eye fell upon one of the maids, passing along the side of the house. "Ah, yes—of course—the washing!" he remembered, and hailed the girl. "Hey, you—Lucy—stop a minute!"

The girl paused, smiling. "Good morning, Master Gerard. Did you want me?"

"I've a pile of washing that needs to be done. Can you see to it for me?"

"Certainly, sir," said Lucy Ashe brightly. "Show me where it is, and I'll take it to the laundry right away."

"You don't mind doing our washing on the Sabbath day?" he asked, with a grin.

She tossed her head, and giggled. "The better the day, the better the deed—that's what my old gran used to say!"

"Then come along. Let's go and fetch it." Gerard set off briskly, calling back over his shoulders, "Goodbye, Coral. Goodbye, Blaise!"

"Goodbye," said Coral, tight-lipped, and a spot of color burned in her cheeks. "Very well, coachman. You may drive on." But she craned her head as they bowled away, looking back to watch Gerard and the pretty chambermaid, until they were out of sight.

Twenty minutes later, Gerard accompanied Lucy into the old washhouse, one of the stone outbuildings adjoining the home farm. There was a huge copper vat full of bubbling water, and the air was thick with

steam. Hot as the day had been outdoors, in here it was almost stifling, and Gerard mopped his brow.

"You're quite sure you don't mind doing this today?" he asked.

Lucy's pretty, pert face was shining as she replied saucily, "For you, sir, I'd do anything . . . you know that."

He lowered his eyes, and tried to ignore the implication in her teasing glance, saying, "I meant—on a Sunday morning."

"Oh, Lord, Master Gerard, I've no time for such things," she retorted. "Sir Brock and her ladyship's gone off to the village for morning service, and now your good lady has taken herself off to Guildford for the Roman Mass—but I notice you're in no hurry to go with any of 'em. . . . You stay home from church with the heathen sinners like me!"

Gerard cleared his throat. It was really oppressively hot in the laundry room.

"I—er—I have other matters to attend to," he said. "Now then, you have all the washing there, haven't you? Shirts, petticoats, the child's small-clothes?"

"Yes, sir, it's all here. Unless of course you'd like me to deal with any other garments. As for instance that waistcoat you're wearing. It's looking a little grubby. It'd come up lovely, once I squeeze it through the suds . . ."

As she spoke, Lucy put out her hand and touched the top button of Gerard's embroidered waistcoat. He did not reply, and she was emboldened to unfasten the button, with cautious fingers.

"It wouldn't take many minutes," she said very softly. And her fingers moved on to the next button, and the next.

There were ten buttons on the waistcoat, and without any haste she unfastened each one of them, working her way slowly down. He could feel the faint butterfly sensation of her fingertips through the ma-

terial, brushing against his chest, traveling down to his diaphragm—

He held his breath as the last button was undone, and his waistcoat fell open. His belly was flat as a board, and she let her hand stray further still, down the fabric of his frilled shirt, to the top of his trousers . . .

She was about to unfasten yet another button, when his hand closed upon her wrist. "No, Lucy. That's enough," he said.

She looked at him under her lashes, and laughed.

"Have you forgotten already?" she asked. "Don't you remember the old times? You and me—and Polly and Rosie and some of the other girls—when you were only a lad. We had some fun in those days, didn't we? And you'd never have stopped me then. Why, this would be just the beginning . . ."

"That was a long time ago, a whole lifetime," he said quietly. "But we're both grown-up now. And times change, people change."

"Do they?" Deliberately, she slid her hand inside the waistband of his trousers, then stopped, taken by surprise. A figure loomed up out of the steam, moving in to join them.

"Oh, 'scuse me, Master Gerard," said Jem Bolt, awkwardly. "I didn't know you was here."

"I'm just leaving," said Gerard. "Thank you, Lucy. Let us have the laundry back as soon as it's dried and ironed. My wife and I will be most grateful to you." And with that he turned and walked out, buttoning up his waistcoat as he went.

"What are you doing here, Jem?" Lucy asked, turning away to busy herself with the washing.

"I was a-going to ask you the same thing," replied Jem. "And what be Master Gerard doing—a-buttoning of his clothes?"

Lucy looked over her shoulder at Jem, with a mischievous smile. "He got overwarm, p'raps. . . . It is powerful hot in here, don't you think?"

Jem looked her up and down. It was four years or more since he had been close to Lucy, but he had not forgotten her. He eyed her rounded, buxom figure appreciatively.

"Seems to me if it be so warm here, you'd do well to take off some of *your* clothes, and all," he said slyly.

"I might do," she replied carelessly. "I often do, when there's nobody else about."

"Then you do as you please, for I shan't mind," Jem urged her, taking a step closer. "After all, in the old days, you and me didn't have no secrets from one another . . ."

"Funny thing. I was only just talking to Master Gerard about those old times, a minute ago. But seemingly he don't want to remember them days."

"More fool him," said Jem, coming closer still.

Slowly, and quite deliberately, Lucy unfastened the plain print dress she wore and let it slip from her shoulders. Carefully, she stepped out of it, picked it up and folded it, putting it in a place of safety.

"Is that better?" she asked. "Are you satisfied?"

And with that she began to put the dirty washing into the steaming copper caldron. She was wearing only a skimpy cotton shift that followed the shape of her body, revealing her figure with shameless clarity.

Jem put his hands on her hips, and pressed himself against her. "It's a whole lot better," he replied. "But I ain't satisfied . . . not by a long chalk."

"Why, Jem, whatever do you mean?" she asked, with mock innocence.

By way of reply he began to gather up the thin material of her shift, bunching it in his broad hands, lifting it higher and higher. . . . Gradually, he drew it up her thighs, until he could see the sweet smooth mound of her hips. In one sudden, brutal movement, Jem jerked free the leather belt that held up his breeches and then thrust his torso against her, feeling her soft skin warm against his naked thighs.

OLD MOON

"No, Jem, not like that. Take me properly," she began to argue, but he would not listen. He had not had a woman for many weeks, and he could not control his desires. She began to struggle and cry out, but his arms gripped her like a steel vise, and his whole body was pressing up on her. She whimpered in fear.

"You're hurting me. Let go—no, no, not that. Jem, *stop!* . . . Stop it, do you hear? Don't do it to me. Don't, please don't!"

But he was merciless, blinded and deafened with lust by this time, and nothing could have stopped him. Repeatedly, he slammed his whole weight against her unprotected flesh, thrusting, impaling, penetrating . . .

She gave one shrill cry of pain and then gasped, choking for breath as the rhythm of his lunging movement accelerated. Pinned down, spread-eagled against the washtub, she had to endure his attack until at last he reached a climax of passion, and she felt his breath scalding the back of her neck as he panted, "Take it, you little bitch . . . now—*now*—"

At that moment, she experienced a curious sensation, midway between pain and ecstasy, and felt a flood of sweet, overwhelming relief sweep through her, so intensely that she almost fainted.

When he finally released his hold and withdrew from her, her knees gave way and she fell to all fours on the soapy, wet floor.

"You devil . . ." she groaned. "You wicked, wicked devil!"

She pulled herself to her feet, dragged her shift about her to cover her nakedness, and made her escape, for the laundry door was half-open and the hot steam drifted out in lazy spirals on the morning air.

Jem scarcely noticed that she had gone. He had achieved the relief he had been seeking and that was all he cared about. Slowly, he began to fasten his clothing.

"A case of criminal assault," said Cassandra Mayne.

Jem started, and rubbed his eyes. "Who? What?" he began stupidly.

Cassie emerged from the vaporous shadows and stood looking at him critically, her head a little on one side.

"A clear case of criminal assault," she repeated. "You could be imprisoned for life, you know—and you'd be very lucky to escape hanging."

"How long have you been there?" he blurted out, hastily buckling his belt.

"Long enough," she replied calmly. "I saw exactly what was going on. And I fancy that when I tell your master what you were up to, you will be in very serious trouble, very serious indeed."

"No—don't tell Master Gerard. No, miss—"

"It's my duty to inform someone in authority. Either your employer or perhaps Sir Broccard Savage, since after all the girl is his responsibility . . ."

"No, don't tell no one, miss, whatever you do. I beg of you—please!" In his panic, Jem put out his hands to her pleadingly, and she brushed him aside with contempt.

"Don't you dare touch me," she said, in quiet, even tones, each word stinging like a whiplash.

"I'll do anything, miss, only don't you say nothing. For pity's sake, don't tell on me—"

She let her glance roam over his strong, sweating body, then looked him straight in the eyes. He felt a sudden surge of excitement that he could not understand. There was something in her gaze that stirred him to the very roots of his being, and the hairs prickled upon the nape of his neck.

"Well . . . I shall have to consider this question very carefully," she said at last. "We cannot leave matters as they are. Something must be done about you—that is quite certain. . . . You had better come to my room this evening—after dinner—and I will let you know what I have decided."

OLD MOON

With that, she turned on her heel and walked out.

As she left the steamy darkness of the laundry and stepped into the daylight, she paused for an instant, and Jem saw her expression, implacable, unmoved and quite determined, her profile sharply outlined against the dazzle of sunshine—like a silhouette.

Chapter Two

TALK OF THE DEVIL

"He's a fine figure of a man," said Rosie wistfully, "no denying that."

"He? Who are you chattering about now, girl?" asked Mrs. Bolt. "Less talk and more do, if you please, miss! We've all these sheets to fold and put away before luncheon."

The housekeeper was in the line room with one of the housemaids. They were busy folding the clean sheets—first lengthwise, then lengthwise again, then coming together as they met at the corners, like the pattern of an old country dance. But Rosie was being slow; her thoughts were elsewhere.

"Why, your Jem, that's who!" she retorted. "I was just remarking, he's really bettered himself, since he got took into service by Master Gerard and that wife of his. Not that *she's* of much account, with her gypsy looks and her gypsy manners—"

"Hold your tongue, girl, and don't speak so of your betters," Mrs. Bolt scolded her. "And look what you're doing—you've got that corner all twisted now."

"Sorry, Mrs. Bolt. . . . I couldn't help thinking, your Jem's quite the gentleman, ain't he? In his fancy clothes . . . and he's that good-looking!"

"Handsome is as handsome does," said Mrs. Bolt primly, though if truth be told she was not displeased to hear her son praised.

The door opened, and Jem himself sidled into the room. "Is there any small beer in the cask, Ma?" he wanted to know. "For I'm fair parched with thirst."

OLD MOON

"You must ask the butler for that, my son. 'Tis his province, not mine." She cast a critical eye over his appearance. "Heavens above, tuck your shirt in, boy! Why, young Rosie was saying only this minute how well you suit your new clothes. . . . And here you are, looking as if you'd been dragged through a hedge backward! What have you been doing, Jemmy, to get yourself in such a state?"

Jem ran a hand through his uncombed hair, and stuffed his shirttails back into his breeches. "I dunno, Ma . . . nothin' special," he muttered, then scowled at Rosie suspiciously. "What have you been saying about me, then, eh?"

"Just passing a remark, like," she answered, coloring a little. "We happened to mention you, and here you are. . . . Talk of the devil, as they say!"

"*Hush, girl!*" Mrs. Bolt's tone was suddenly fearful, and they both turned to stare at her.

"Don't you go mentioning that name, not in my hearing," she added, and they saw the instinctive terror in her face.

"'Tis only a saying," Rosie began to defend herself.

"There's some sayings as shouldn't be said! And I won't have you calling up the powers of darkness, specially not at this time of year . . ."

"Why, what d'you mean by that, Ma?"

"Haven't you seen the moon these past few nights? Wearing two horns and tipped over, so that all our good luck may run out of it. . . ." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "There's folks around these parts as will tell you that's the Devil's moon. . . . And there's none of us will escape from his power till it has waxed and waned."

Jem tried to laugh. He wasn't going to let his mother scare him with her old-fashioned warnings. But he remembered his last sight of Cassandra Mayne. He thought of her imperious command as she

walked out of the laundry . . . and the laughter died upon his lips.

At about the same moment, Coral and Blaise were strolling back toward the house from the stables. They had attended Mass in Guildford, and they had been driven home in the family coach. Liberated at last, Blaise hopped and skipped along the path, swinging on Coral's hand. Then he suddenly stopped and pointed.

"Look, oh, do look!" he cried out. "There's someone playing hide-and-seek."

Coral peered into the bushes. Blaise's sharp eyes had picked out a movement among the shrubbery, and as she watched, she saw a hand, a shoulder, wriggling for cover behind a screen of leaves.

"Who's there?" she called sharply. "Who are you?"

Slowly the branches parted, and Lucy Ashe crept into view. "'Tis only me, ma'am," she answered guiltily.

Coral took in her condition at one glance. Her hair was lank and damp, tumbled down her back, and the single garment she wore was wet through, clinging to every curve and crease of her body, showing up the sharp outline of her nipples, and even revealing the tangle of hair in the shadow between her thighs.

"I didn't want no one to see me, ma'am. I been busy in the washhouse, see, and I got soaked to the skin."

And that's not all you've been doing, Coral thought, as she watched her.

The girl's eyes were large and lustrous, the pupils strangely dilated. Her breathing was quick and excited, as if she had been running, and Coral noticed how she crossed her hands across her breasts, her fingers seeming almost to caress the sensitive areas of her skin.

Somewhere, with someone, she had been making love.

Aloud, Coral said, "Very well, you'd better go to

your room and put on some dry clothes. You don't want to catch cold."

Lucy needed no further bidding, but dashed off like a frightened rabbit.

Blaise, watching her run away, crowed with laughter, and said, "Why was she hiding? Was she playing games?"

"Very likely," replied Coral evenly. "Yes . . . I believe she has been playing games."

When they entered the house, Blaise raced off to Ivory, for she was the first baby he had ever encountered, and he was fascinated to meet another human being so much smaller than himself. He found her, as usual, in the nursery, upon her mother's lap, and stayed to chatter with them both. Garnet encouraged the friendship between these infant cousins. She was glad that, for one generation at least, there were no barriers separating the two families.

Meanwhile Coral ascended the stairs to her bedroom, taking off her bonnet and shaking loose her shining curls. When she entered, expecting the room to be empty, she was surprised to find Gerard there.

He was stripped to the waist, and at the sight of his smooth, tanned body, his sturdy shoulders and chest tapering down to his slim hips, and his arms strongly muscled as he lifted a clean shirt above his head, she felt a pang of love and desire.

"Oh—Gerard," she began. She would have liked to go to him and cover him with kisses. Even now, when they had been together for so many years and she had come to know him more intimately than any other person in the world, he still possessed the power to stir and attract her.

But when he turned to glance at her, his face was troubled and unwelcoming.

"Oh, hello," he said. "You're back then, are you?"

"Yes, Gerard."

"I hope you're feeling properly holy? All your sins and wickednesses purged and forgiven?" he continued

sardonically, as he proceeded to pull on the clean shirt.

Her spirits, which had been so high only a moment before, declined at once. "Yes, Gerard," she repeated flatly.

Clearly, he was in no mood for a demonstration of her affection.

"Where's the boy?" he wanted to know.

"With his aunt and his cousin, I believe." She moved across to the bed, putting down her bonnet, and added, "Why are you changing your shirt? I put out a clean one for you this morning."

"It became damp and so did my waistcoat. They were too uncomfortable to wear."

She picked up the embroidered waistcoat that lay where he had flung it down, across the foot of the bed. It was true—several patches on the silk facing by the buttonholes showed discolored spots, moist to her touch.

"How did that happen?" she asked.

"You remember I took our dirty washing in to be laundered? I suppose I must have gone too near the washtub." Gerard spoke lightly, then suddenly broke off, saying with concern, "Why, Coral—what's the matter? Why do you look at me so?"

She replied with an effort. "I don't know. . . . How do I look, Gerard?"

"So pale, so shocked. . . . You seem almost—frightened."

She walked to the bedroom window without answering, and stood looking at the beauty of the garden in its full autumnal glory. Then she said at last, with her back still toward him, "Do I? How strange. . . . For you are quite right, I do feel frightened."

"What are you saying? What is there to be frightened of?"

She put her hand to the window catch and slid the

OLD MOON

frame open, taking in a long breath of the warm, scented air.

"Nothing. And that's the worst of all—to feel frightened of nothing—and on such a perfect day, too."

The perfect day crept by slowly. The sun shone brilliantly as it traversed the empty sky and sank at last into the orange haze of the western horizon, as if into a featherbed. It would be another fine day tomorrow.

As the shadows lengthened and twilight fell, the half-moon rose, pearly and deceptively fragile, against a background of blue velvet. The "Devil's moon" was growing a little stronger and more powerful with each night that passed. Its pallid rays even succeeded in penetrating the house. Through the dining-room windows, which stood wide open to the balmy evening, faint patterns of moonlight decorated the cream-and-gold carpet.

But the five people seated around the oval mahogany table were too intent upon their own affairs to notice it.

Garnet tried to keep the mood pleasant and affable, but she was not having a great deal of success. "A little more pie, Coral? Come, I'm sure you can manage another taste of cook's apple-and-blackberry pie, and there is plenty of cream in the jug. . . . Gerard, pass the cream to Coral."

"Certainly, if she wishes for more."

Gerard pushed the silver creamer, in the shape of a cow, across the polished table-top. Coral rejected it abruptly, and a tiny splash of cream spattered the surface.

"No, thank you. Oh, I beg your pardon—I didn't mean to be so clumsy."

"There's no need to apologize, my dear," said Brock heartily. "And no need to cry over spilt milk—or cream either, for that matter."

"Allow me." Cassie Mayne, always watchful and

always solicitous, stretched forward to dab at the spillage with the corner of her table napkin. "There, that won't leave any mark."

"I'm very sorry," Coral repeated, but she stuck to her guns nevertheless. "I was only trying to say, I don't want anything more to eat, thank you, but I *do* want to talk about Gerard—and the inheritance!"

Brock and Garnet exchanged glances. Once Coral had made up her mind to something, she was not easily put off.

Gerard groaned. "Give it a rest, Coral. Let's drop that subject. . . . It's become an infernal bore to everyone."

"To everyone else, perhaps. Well, I'm sorry for that, but it's not at all boring to me, and I'm sure it's not so to you . . ." Coral swiveled around to face her hostess, returning to the attack. "You must see how deeply hurt and upset Gerard feels about this. He did nothing to deserve such treatment from his father, and it's not right—"

"Father was disappointed that Gerard did not follow a career in the army," Garnet tried to explain. "I agree it was a very unfair decision, but what's done is done. . . . Cassie, a little more apple pie for you?"

"Thank you, no. I'm not very hungry tonight," Cassie replied. "The weather is so warm, it quite takes away one's appetite, don't you agree, Mrs. Mallory?"

Coral scarcely heard her; she brushed aside this irrelevant interruption, continuing to address Garnet directly.

"I'm only saying that something should be done, in all fairness, to make it up to Gerard in some way. . . . Surely it's not asking too much that he should be granted at least a portion of the family estate? I know he's too honorable to suggest such a thing himself—that's why I must speak out on his behalf."

Garnet cut in quickly, "My dear Coral, do you suppose I haven't already explored that possibility? I dis-

cussed the problem with Brock, and he tells me it would be out of the question. From a legal point of view, the terms of Father's will are—"

"To blazes with the legal point of view. I'm only concerned with common humanity!" snapped Coral, clenching her fist upon the tabletop.

Cassie spoke smoothly, as if she would pour oil on troubled waters. "Dear Mrs. Mallory, do be advised, Sir Broccard understands these things. I'm quite sure that whatever he has decided must be for the best."

"Thank you, Miss Mayne. Perhaps you'll allow me to make my own explanations?" Brock said sharply, and Cassie lowered her eyes.

"I don't want to hear another word on the subject!" Gerard's brows were wrinkled with distaste and annoyance. "Coral, I must insist that you stop embarrassing everyone. . . . Let's talk of something else."

"I'm only trying to help you," she began.

"I don't want your help! Can't you understand that? For pity's sake mind your own business!"

Coral flinched, as if he had struck her a physical blow, but she still persisted in her own defense.

"I think it *is* my business. For it is your future we are discussing—and as I am your wife, I should hope that your future is mine also. . . . Or am I wrong to assume so much?"

There was a moment of frozen silence, and then everyone started talking.

"Of course we understand that, Coral." (This, warmly, from Garnet.)

"It's not a matter that can be altered so easily," began Brock.

"Why must you take everything so personally?" Gerard complained.

"It's very understandable, surely," Cassie chimed in. "It's not yourselves alone you have to consider, but your little boy. As your son and heir, you are bound to feel protective of his interests—I'm sure we all appreciate that."

ROSEWOOD

Everyone was looking at her, and Cassie's voice faltered uncomfortably. "I beg your pardon—perhaps I'm speaking out of turn. I got carried away."

"Not at all, Cassie," Garnet assured her. "But you are mistaken—Blaise is not Gerard's son, but his nephew."

"Oh? Forgive me, I did not understand."

"It's perfectly simple," said Coral. "Blaise is the son of my sister Rosalie, and her husband, Paul la Roche. Paul is a French diplomat, and he has to travel a great deal in the service of his country. That is why Gerard and I agreed to help by adopting Blaise."

"How very fortunate. But—why? I must be very stupid, but I don't quite follow," Cassie persisted.

Now it was Gerard's turn to explain. "We were all agreed, it would be better for the boy to have a permanent home. Too much chopping and changing is not good for youngsters—it was beginning to unsettle him. That's why we brought him home to England."

"Gerard believed at that time that Rosewood was to be his permanent home, you see," Coral said pointedly.

Gerard ignored this, and continued. "I am determined the boy shall have a good education. I want him to stay in England at least until he has finished his schooling."

At this, Coral gave a cry of dismay. "Oh, no, Gerard—surely not! . . . That will take another ten years at least. You cannot imagine that we are going to stay in England for all that time, after what has happened."

"Please, Coral, let's not talk about it now—"

"But I couldn't bear to be away from Ireland so long, you know that—"

"How can we go back to Ireland? There's nothing for us there."

"There's nothing for us here, that's plain to see. At

OLD MOON

least in Ireland we can be free to live as we please. We can both find work there—”

For the moment, they forgot they were not alone. Their tempers were running high, and they stared into each other's eyes across the table, looking for comfort and reassurance, and finding none.

Cassie's quiet, deferential voice slid into the argument almost unnoticed.

“You both work? That interests me a great deal. What sort of work do you do, Mrs. Mallory? I should so like to know . . .”

Coral, distracted from her tussle with Gerard, replied almost off-handedly, “I? Oh, I'm an actress—didn't you know?”

It was not, perhaps, quite as shattering a pronouncement as it might have been. If Coral had answered, “I am a harlot,” the effect would have been even more shocking—but not a great deal. In the early years of the nineteenth century, there was not, after all, very much to choose between the two professions, at least as far as the general public was concerned.

Another moment of stunned silence halted the conversation. Then, with the overtones still echoing about the room, Brock said, “Garnet, my dear, since no one appears to wish for anything more to eat, might I suggest that you ladies retire to the drawing room, leaving Gerard and myself to our port and brandy?”

“Very well, Brock. . . . Coral, Cassie, shall we?” Garnet gathered them up firmly and led the way from the dining room.

Brock exhaled a long breath, puffing out his cheeks, then passed the tantalus across the table, with its choice of decanters.

“Help yourself, my dear chap.”

Gerard did not accept the invitation immediately, but said, almost to himself, “Coral is one of the finest actresses I have ever seen. She is an accomplished musician who has given recitals before the highest in

the land, not only in Ireland, but in France and in America too. . . . And yet none of that matters a damn, for I tell you that she is also the finest woman I ever met, and I count myself very lucky to be her husband—and if I live to be a hundred, I shall never be worthy of her.”

Brock nodded.

“Quite so. I applaud your sentiments, Gerard. Now pour yourself a drink, for God’s sake.”

In the drawing room, the three ladies sipped coffee, and tried—with difficulty—to make polite conversation.

“An actress, you say?” Garnet offered Coral the sugar bowl. “That’s very enterprising. You must tell us all about it.”

Putting a generous spoonful into her cup and stirring it vigorously, Coral remarked, “No doubt it shocks you? I was forgetting—it must seem very shocking to someone in your position.”

“I’m not in the least shocked,” Garnet replied truthfully. “But I am extremely interested. You see, it’s an unknown world to me. It’s all so fascinating, so utterly strange . . .”

Still on the defensive, Coral stopped, her cup poised halfway to her lips, and commented, “Not so very strange to you, surely? For, according to what Gerard has told me, when you first met your husband, were you not dressed up in a fancy costume also, and playing an unlikely role?”

Garnet bit her lip, then answered quietly, “That’s perfectly true, I admit, but please don’t imagine I was criticizing you in any way.”

“I’m afraid that your criticism is a matter of indifference to me, Lady Savage,” retorted Coral quickly. “Just as my criticism of your behavior in respect of Gerard’s inheritance is obviously of no interest to you.”

The little ornamental clock on the chimney shelf startled them all by striking nine, with a thin, brittle

chime. Cassie, who had been sitting slightly apart from the others but watching and listening to their exchanges intently, now rose to her feet.

"Forgive me, please. Will you allow me to withdraw from this conversation?"

Garnet reproached herself. "Cassie, we have been too much absorbed. We are neglecting you."

"Not at all . . . but I do have a slight headache. With your permission, I will retire to my room. I'm sure I shall feel much better after an early night."

"Well, certainly, if that is what you wish . . ."

"Thank you. Good night, Garnet, and good night, Coral . . ."

Garnet raised one eyebrow by a fraction of an inch, registering the use of Coral's first name.

"May I say just one thing before I go?" Cassie continued earnestly. "And it is this. . . . I know that there are some difficulties between you, but I should be very sorry to think that there was any really bad feeling. Because I like you both so very much, and as each of you has talked to me frankly, I know that those differences are not really so important."

She moved to the door, and opened it, pausing to say, "That's why I ask you both, from the bottom of my heart, please, do try to be friends . . ." And with that she left the room.

Garnet put her coffee cup into its saucer with a little clatter, and remarked: "I had not realized that you had become so intimate. Do tell me, what have you been saying to one another?"

"Nothing of any consequence, I assure you," said Coral carelessly, then added as an afterthought, "Why—what have you told her—about *me*?"

Garnet smiled politely, and began to stir her cup once more. There ensued another, even longer silence; and they both drank their coffee.

When Jem presented himself at Cassie's room, he knocked upon the door rather tentatively. Nothing

happened. Easing his weight from one foot to the other he knocked again. Almost at once, the door opened an inch.

"I heard you the first time. . . . Are you always so impatient?" said Cassie, as she let him into the room. "You told no one you were coming here? Nobody saw you?"

"No, miss."

"I hope not—for your sake." She moved behind him, and he heard the key click in the lock.

"Now we shall not be disturbed," she said. She prodded him in the small of the back, propelling him forward. "Stand there, Jem Bolt—and let me have a good look at you."

Jem felt himself beginning to sweat again at the sound of her voice. He looked about him; this used to be Miss Garnet's room, once upon a time. He could remember coming up here sometimes, carrying cans of hot water for her bath. There was the folding screen in one corner, just as he remembered it, and the four-poster bed. But the room was no longer filled with Garnet's personality. Another presence had invaded it . . . this cold, enigmatic stranger who now circled him slowly, looking him up and down.

She wore a long gown, buttoned high at the neck and reaching to the floor, shapeless, like a tent, of some dark, drab material. She seemed to Jem to be robed as severely as a priest, or a schoolmaster, or a judge . . . and her expression betrayed no hint of kindness, as she stared at him.

"You don't *look* like a monster," she said at last.

"No, miss," said Jem quickly, hopefully.

"But that is what you are, isn't it?" She turned away as if in disgust.

His hopes dashed, he did not reply.

"*Well?* I asked you a question—are you deaf?" She whirled around suddenly, accusingly. "Are you deliberately trying to annoy me?"

"No, miss."

OLD MOON

"Then reply when I speak to you. . . . You *are* a monster, are you not? You brutally raped that poor girl this morning—without pity—without mercy. . . . You admit you did such a wicked thing?"

"Yes, miss . . ." His voice was hardly more than a whisper now.

"And I only have to say the word, and you will be imprisoned—or worse. . . . You put a grave responsibility upon me, Jem Bolt." She paced the little room, as if pondering her dilemma. "What am I to do with you? I cannot let you escape the consequences, for fear it might encourage you to attack some other helpless creature. But if I hand you over to the justices, I may have your life upon my conscience . . ."

Jem felt his hands shaking, and he clasped them together. "Please, miss, don't say nothing—"

"Silence! You will speak only when you are required to do so." She paced the room for a few more moments, while Jem sweated and waited, on tenter-hooks.

"You plead for mercy, do you? You beg for leniency, for compassion?"

He did not completely understand her words, but the meaning was clear enough. He nodded eagerly. "Yes, miss—I beg of you."

"Beg, then . . . on your knees. Do you hear me? *On your knees!*" . . .

Quickly, he obeyed, dropping to his knees, and as she came close to him, he tried to take her hands between his own, in supplication.

"Please, miss, be good to me and let me go—"

"I told you before—*do not touch me!* . . . I will not be touched!" She moved back, out of reach, then said slowly and thoughtfully, "But I will be good to you, Jem Bolt . . . I will be so very good to you. . . . For I will not report you to the proper authorities. Instead—I propose to punish you myself. Do you agree?"

He did not understand this at all, but he was quick

to assent to the new plan, whatever it might be. Anything was preferable to arrest and imprisonment.

"Very well. Then, as a first step, and to ensure you shall not be so stupid as to try and lay hands upon me again, I must take precautions." She moved to the little table beside the bed, and for the first time Jem noticed—with some surprise—that there were some lengths of cord laid ready. She picked one out, and brought it across to him.

"Slip off your jacket, Jem Bolt, and then put your hands together."

He obeyed; he had no alternative. In his shirt-sleeves, and still upon his knees, he put up his hands and watched, bemused, as she knotted the cords tightly about his wrists.

"There. You cannot get free now, I think. . . . Very well, you may stand up."

He struggled to his feet. She stood watching him for a few seconds, and he suddenly realized, with a strange mixture of fear and excitement, that she was smiling. Once more she walked carefully around him, inspecting him from every angle, as if he were a prize beast at a county market, up for sale.

With a sudden tremor, he remembered someone else who had once looked at him in the same way. . . . At the momentary recollection of Mrs. Lockhart, the American widow woman, he felt a stirring within his loins, at the mere thought . . .

As if she had been reading his mind, Cassie said, coaxingly, "Perhaps you would be happier upon the bed?"

He stared at her, unable to believe his ears, and as before, her temper flashed out swiftly. "Don't just stand there, you great blockhead. . . . On the bed, I tell you. Lie down!"

Awkwardly, he did as he was told. With a little difficulty, since he could not use his hands, he sat on the end of the bed and lay back, then wriggled along until he was lying at full length.

OLD MOON

"That's the way. . . . That is how I want you to remain. And to make quite sure, I think we had better harness you in that position. . . . Lie still."

He was stretched out comfortably enough, with his head upon the pillow, and he wondered what she meant; but he soon discovered, as she set to work with the longest piece of cord. She ran it under his right armpit, and passed it beneath his shoulders, then drew it forward under his left arm. To do this, she had to bend over him. They were very close, her face not more than six inches away from his own, and he could smell the sweet, alluring perfume upon her body. The muscles in his groin tightened even more, as she tied each end of the cord to the posts at the bedhead. Now he was securely pinned down; he could not move sideways, or roll over. Flat upon his back, he was almost helpless, except for his legs.

He raised one knee—and she snapped at him instantly, "I told you to be still! . . . So, you'd disobey me, would you?"

She took two spare cords and busied herself once more. He could not see what she did, but he could feel the fetters biting into his ankles, and his legs were dragged apart—until she had made the last knot secure and he found himself totally unable to stir, his feet fastened to the remaining pillars of the four-poster, trussed up like a victim awaiting sacrifice.

Then she laughed softly.

"You poor fool. . . . You enjoyed forcing your attentions upon that girl this morning, didn't you? She was helpless—just as you are now. . . . How does it feel, Jem Bolt?"

He shook his head, completely bewildered. Even now, he could not make out what was happening. He only knew that he was a prisoner, and his beautiful, scornful captor was laughing at him. He could not move hand or foot; he was motionless, except for the throbbing of the blood in his veins . . .

She let her eyes travel slowly down the length of

his body and saw the tumescent activity at his groin, his tight, neat trousers displaying a contour like a clenched fist.

"You're still as shameless as ever, aren't you?" she said gloatingly, and as she spoke, she began to unbutton the long, prim gown she wore.

Jem could not believe his eyes as she peeled the garment slowly from her.

She took a long time to undress; first she slid one bare arm into view, then another. Then she let the material slip just enough to uncover a beautiful breast, and allowed the full, sweeping skirts to fall back, revealing a shapely leg . . . a calf . . . a knee . . . a luscious thigh . . .

She turned her back, smiling down at him over her shoulder, and slowly lowered the garment, inch by inch. Her long, supple spine slid into view, and below, the sinuous curve of her hips, wriggling and tantalizing. Beneath her right breast, he thought he saw a crimson flower—or was it a birthmark? The sweat ran into his eyes, stinging him.

"Don't you wish you were free now, with the use of your hands?" she asked playfully.

At last she abandoned this little game, and tossed aside the gown, then climbed up on to the bed. But still she would not touch him. Instead, she knelt upon all fours, straddling his body, and laughing in his face. At no point did she allow her limbs to make contact with his, and by now the sweat was rolling off him in streams.

"How does it feel?" she repeated, in a throaty purr. "How does it feel—to be so helpless?"

Then she raised one soft, feminine hand—and slapped him across the face with all her strength, so that his head jerked sideways and the blow left a livid mark across his cheek.

"That's your punishment," she continued, in the same low tone. "And believe me, Jem Bolt, your suffering has only just begun . . ."

OLD MOON

And then she brought both her hands down to his waist, and began to unbuckle his belt, very slowly indeed, watching him narrowly all the while, enjoying his incredulity.

"Oh, yes, this is your punishment," she repeated under her breath. "And it is also my satisfaction . . ."

He was unable to stop her; and in some dark, mysterious way, he did not wish her to stop. His body trembled and shook, as she began to unfasten the buttons of his tight breeches, and he felt the soft, silky touch of her fingertips upon his naked skin. She toyed with the hair upon his belly, tickling and teasing him, pinching him and playing with him, arousing his masculinity to such a pitch that he felt sure he would burst with the strength of his passion.

"You can do nothing . . . *nothing*, do you hear? . . . Nothing but submit to me, and obey my will . . ."

With infinite care, she drew apart his garments, exposing the most private area of his body to her scrutiny, and never ceasing to stroke him and stimulate him with exquisite skill. He began to shudder convulsively, his manhood jerking under her hands, his whole body threshing in an agony of frustration; while strange whimpering sounds emerged from his throat. He could not endure another minute of this torment—not another second!

At that precise instant, she lowered herself expertly upon him, and as his whole being exploded in a long, delirious climax that seemed to go on forever, she threw back her head and laughed again, in reckless triumph.

"You're all mine now, Jem Bolt, do you understand that? . . . You belong to me!"

Chapter Three

LYDIA

The climax could not go on forever. Indeed, it did not last nearly long enough to satisfy Cassie's appetites.

She did not release Jem for a long, long while. Instead, she stayed astride him, feeling his initial ardor dwindling—but still she retained her mastery over him. Imperiously, she demanded more response; by every means at her command, she brought her skills to bear upon him, slowly awakening his passion yet again, and knowing a strange delight as he fulfilled her expectations once more.

This time she encouraged him with a guile he mistook for tenderness, and his lust redoubled. This time she became enflamed by the growing excitement within her, and her whole body convulsed again and again, her mind and her flesh alike on fire with ecstasy. Then, as she relaxed at last, Jem began to ascend to a second orgasm—and the moment that she recognized this, she withdrew herself, cruelly denying him relief.

"Not so fast . . ." She spat out the words.

He was the instrument of her pleasure, and she was in complete control. He groaned aloud with frustration, and she laughed at his helplessness. For this was not the end; this was only the beginning of a night that Jem was never to forget, for the rest of his life.

Naked and exultant, she rode him like a horse, and whipped him, too, when he did not respond quickly enough to satisfy her. She used every inch of her smooth, satin skin to arouse him in unimaginable ways, making lewd conjections between the most amazing

OLD MOON

parts of their anatomy—mouths, genitals, breasts, groins—exciting within him passions that he had never even dreamed of.

Only at long last, when she herself was slaked and satiated, did she give him his freedom.

As she untied the final cord, she looked down at him, amused to see him rubbing the red, raw marks where his skin was chafed. "Cover yourself with your clothes, Jem Bolt. You look a little ridiculous," she said, with a faint echo of her former mockery.

He obeyed slowly, moving stiffly and awkwardly. He did not speak; his head was still in a whirl, and he could produce no coherent thoughts.

"Go now . . . and take care you are not seen."

She did not trouble to don her own garment, but lay back, leaning against the pillows lazily, her body stretched out in total, unconcerned nudity.

He licked his lips, and muttered huskily, "Will we—I mean—can I come to you again, some other night?"

She put her head on one side, considering him thoughtfully, and then smiled. "Oh, yes . . . you'll come back again . . . when I tell you to. Because from this moment, you will do everything I tell you. You are my slave, are you not?"

He nodded, easing the neckcloth below his chin, and swallowed hard.

"That is right. And you will not keep any secrets from me. You will tell me all I wish to know, and hide nothing . . . for you are mine—body and soul. . . . And now you may leave me to get some sleep."

She yawned, raising her arms above her head, and her hard, round breasts lifted provocatively.

Jem took a last look at her and turned away. He was her victim now. He knew it, and he did not care. After this night of revelation, nothing in his life would ever be the same again.

Upon another floor, in another wing of the house, Garnet awoke from a restless sleep and lay for a mo-

ment in the darkness, wondering what had disturbed her. Was it Ivory?

She listened intently for any sound from the adjoining nursery, but there was nothing to be heard. Nothing except the quick, impatient breathing of Brock, beside her in the big bed.

She realised that Brock too was awake, and there was a strange, rattling note in his respiration that alarmed her.

"Brock—darling, are you ill?"

He did not reply immediately, and she turned toward him. "What is it? Shall I light the candle?"

As if in answer, he put out a hand and touched her knee, then slipped his fingertips up her thigh, passing swiftly to the soft, sensitive zone between her legs.

She shivered involuntarily with pleasure at his touch, and relaxed. So that was the reason for his rapid breath! She spread her thighs, awaiting his next move.

"Garnet . . ." His voice was low and vibrant as he drew her close to him. She felt his torso against her, and for a moment she was pricked by anxiety once more. He was so very warm—she could feel his sweat slippery upon her—could he be feverish?

"Are you sure you're not ill?" she repeated.

He refused to answer her, but pulled her roughly into his arms, and his masculinity seemed even hotter than the rest of his body—hard and importunate, thrusting as if to force an entry.

She tried to laugh, protesting playfully, "Brock! Don't be in such a hurry, give me time to come to meet you!"

But it was as if he were suddenly deaf to her entreaties. He rolled clumsily on top of her, his body heavy between her thighs, and she felt a stab of pain as he probed her.

Now she knew without any doubt that something was wrong. From the first night that they had slept together, he had been the most considerate of lovers—

patiently and gently leading her from one stage to another in their mutual exploration of delight, pacing his own satisfaction to her pleasure. Never in all that time had he sought his own fulfilment without regard for hers—never, until tonight . . .

She tensed up, and that made it worse immediately—for as her muscles tightened, he redoubled his own impatient movements, tearing into her. . . . She gave a gasp of pain as he violated her cruelly, and this seemed to bring him to his senses.

He caught his breath, and became quite still, saying, "Garnet . . . I must ask you something."

But his voice was harsh, and unfamiliar—the voice of a stranger.

Half-afraid of the man within her embrace, she whispered, "Yes Brock. You are in pain, aren't you? I knew it—I can tell—"

His hands tightened upon her shoulders and he replied thickly, "A twinge from my old trouble. A headache—nothing more. . . . That's not important."

"But it *is* important. I wish you'd agree to let me call a doctor tomorrow for a consultation."

"Be quiet!" He silenced her almost brutally, and then controlled himself. "I'm sorry . . . but you don't understand, I'm not concerned with that now. There is something that worries me far more . . ."

As he spoke, he began to shift his body again, moving within her, at first almost imperceptibly, but gradually building to a steady, insistent rhythm. His words came disconnectedly, in short bursts: "I must ask you . . . if you love me, do as I tell you—and speak to your companion—tomorrow!"

Garnet's head was spinning. She could not understand what he meant—and by now this remorseless, repeated assault upon her was starting to enflame her senses. She felt herself giving way to his driving force, and a flood of raw, tingling excitement began to spread through her whole body.

"What, what are you saying?" she gasped. "What about Cassie?"

"Tell her she must go. Pack her bags—leave this house—I won't have her here—a moment longer—will you do that—for me?"

She stiffened in his arms, trying to resist his overwhelming power. "No! You can't ask me to—it's not fair—I won't!" she retorted, with her heart pounding.

"Then if you will not, I shall tell her myself!" he cried, and as he spoke, she felt a shudder pass through him, and she knew that he was in the grip of some physical agony.

It was as if he tried to plunge himself into sexual gratification so deeply that he would shake off every other sensation. For now he struggled to achieve a climax, fighting off the waves of pain that besieged him, trying to drown his suffering in an ecstasy of lust.

Garnet had never experienced such desperation, and his intensity terrified her. Worse, he seemed almost to forget that she existed, as he ploughed into her again and again. . . . His whole weight lay upon her, and she felt trapped beneath him. Her breasts were flattened, her ribcage constricted so that she could hardly breathe. She started to feel panic, certain that she must expire under this ceaseless battering.

And then relief came at last. He achieved the release he had been fighting for, in a series of long, groaning spasms that shook him from head to foot, and almost suffocated her. And then he lay still—as still as death.

Gently, she eased herself a little to one side, and filled her lungs with blessed air. But she did not let go of him, lying with her arms entwined about him, soothing him and comforting him wordlessly, until she could tell by his slow, regular breathing that he was asleep at last, and the ordeal was over.

The next day he did not refer to this strange incident. She wondered whether he had already forgotten it, whether it might have been a kind of nightmare?

OLD MOON

She asked him how he was, and he replied tonelessly that he was perfectly well—and she knew that he was lying. They did not speak of Cassie at all, and Garnet hoped his sudden obsession upon that subject had been merely a part of his delirium. She said nothing, trusting that he had already obliterated it from his mind.

Later, she would make another attempt to persuade him to see a doctor.

The golden autumn sunshine returned, and at breakfast time, Garnet announced to the rest of the family, "I believe they are to start bringing in the harvest today, before the weather breaks. It might be pleasant to go down to the fields and watch them cutting the corn. Would you like that, Blaise?"

Little Blaise didn't understand what the harvest might be, but he was eager to go on any expedition with his Aunt Garnet, providing—

"Will Ivory go too?" he wanted to know.

"Yes, Ivory will take a turn in the sun with us," Garnet smiled. "Shall you and Coral join the party?" she added, turning to Gerard.

"What? Harvesting? Oh—yes, why not?" Gerard seemed preoccupied.

Coral watched her husband and noticed that he was eating very little. He crumbled a piece of bread between his fingers, making crumbs upon the plate, but he seemed to have no appetite. Her heart ached for him. She knew how unhappy he was, and she was unable to help him.

"Perhaps a day in the open air will do us all good," she agreed politely. "Sir Broccard, are you to accompany us?"

Brock, too, was strangely withdrawn. He sat behind a copy of the newspaper, buried in the latest intelligence from France or Spain, and Garnet had to recall him to the conversation.

"Eh? Oh, no—thank you—I shall be occupied within the house today. I have a great deal of business to attend to."

ROSEWOOD

Garnet noted with a pang that his face was gray; he looked tired and haggard. Whatever demon had been plaguing him last night, it had not finished with him yet.

Nevertheless, it was a gorgeous day. The late roses still bloomed in profusion as the little party passed among the flowerbeds, as if there were to be no such thing as winter, and an eternal summer should reign undisputed, forever.

Garnet led the way through the orchards, with Ivory in her arms, and a silk parasol shading them both. Some yards behind, Blaise tugged impatiently at Coral's hand.

"Can I run on and catch Aunt Garnet?" he asked. "I want to go with her—with Ivory."

"No, Blaise!" Coral's tone was sharp and decisive. "You're to stay here with me, where I can keep an eye on you. I don't want you running off and getting into mischief."

The small boy grumbled to himself but obeyed, using up his abundant energy by racing in wide circles around Gerard and Coral as they sauntered down beside the meadows of the home farm.

Every available man and woman on the estate had been pressed into service to bring in the harvest, and already the fields were thronged with workers, scything, reaping, gathering the cut stalks and tying them into sheaves.

One of the oldest of the farmhands, wearing an ancient smock and a broad-brimmed straw hat, made a low bow as Gerard and Coral passed, uncovering his bald head. "Good day to you, Master Gerard, and welcome home," he chuckled, showing a toothless grin. "Welcome to you and your good lady."

Gerard forced a smile in return, and explained to Coral, "This is old Ebb . . . Ebenezer Bramley, Rosewood's oldest inhabitant. He used to sit me on his lap when I was a baby, so I'm told."

OLD MOON

"How do you do, Mr. Bramley?" asked Coral, giving the old man her hand.

He winked at her, jerking his head at Gerard. "Proper little varmint, he were then!" he reminisced, leaning upon the handle of his scythe. "I mind the time he was racing about, just like that youngster of yours is a-doing now . . ."

He indicated Blaise, still keeping up his tireless circling patrol, dodging in and out of the corn sheaves.

"Takes me back a few years, I can tell 'ee," old Ebenezer continued, and as Blaise returned within earshot, he added, "Spittin' image of his dad, that little 'un . . . just like Master Gerard was at his age, like as two peas in a pod, they be."

"Oh, but Blaise isn't—" Coral began.

Gerard interrupted, almost angrily, "Thank you, Eb. You can get on with your work now. . . . Blaise, go and find your Aunt Garnet. Run along!"

Blaise laughed, delighted to be given permission to do as he wished, and raced off pellmell in pursuit of the others.

"Why did you do that?" asked Coral indignantly. "You know I only just this minute told him he had to stay with us."

"Well, I get fatigued by these continual misunderstandings. Don't you find it tiresome to be forever explaining who Blaise is?"

"Not especially . . . and he *is* our son now—to all intents and purposes. He looks on us as his parents. Why are you so touchy all of a sudden?" Coral wanted to know.

Gerard shrugged, but said no more. He walked on along the path through the fields, with Coral following. She watched the stiff, uncomfortable set of his shoulders, and the defiant set of his head—and she could tell that he was feeling guilty.

It made no sense, but she knew that she was right. She remembered a dozen other occasions in the past when she had seen that air of sullen bravado, when

he had been amusing himself with the ladies of Madame Violette's establishment in New Orleans, for instance—and even earlier, in Paris, after those reckless nights in the Black Rendezvous, or when she caught him frolicking with the pupils of a certain school for young ladies. There was no doubt about it—Gerard had a guilty conscience.

She tried to think why this might be—and suddenly an answer was presented to her, confirming her worst suspicions.

As Gerard picked his way through the cornfield, he made a small detour around one of the sheaves, and stopped short. He had almost tripped over a young woman kneeling upon the ground, tying up an armful of cut stalks. She looked up and saw him, and flushed, dimpling a smile.

It was Lucy Ashe.

Coral caught the unspoken message that sparked between them, and interpreted it instantly, remembering how they had gone to the laundry together and how she had come upon Lucy afterward.

It was all over in a moment. Gerard nodded politely to the girl and moved on, and Lucy watched him go, with a long, appraising look. When she saw Coral, her face changed, and she remarked almost pertly: "Good morning, ma'am. Nice day for the time of year."

Coral did not answer her; she could not. For her, the sun had ceased to shine. The golden weather had turned to bleak, icy winter, and she felt a chill at her heart.

She caught up with Gerard a few yards farther on and caught at his sleeve, saying abruptly: "It's her, isn't it? . . . That girl, the one from the laundry—"

Gerard stopped and frowned at her. "For heaven's sake, lower your voice. What are you saying?"

"She's the one—the reason you're unhappy. You've got yourself mixed up with that girl, haven't you?"

"No!" He pulled free from her restraining arm, his

face cold and resentful. "You're talking rubbish. I've hardly spoken to her. What's wrong with you?"

She stood looking into his eyes, and after a moment he turned away, unwilling to meet her gaze.

"There's nothing wrong with me, Gerard. But something is wrong with you, something is very wrong. . . . Why won't you tell me what troubles you?"

He walked away, muttering over his shoulder, "You're dreaming. . . . I don't know what you're talking about."

Coral wanted to run after him, to hit him, or take him in her arms—to insist that he tell the truth, put an end to this quarrel, as they had done so often in the past, by falling into a deep, sweet embrace of reconciliation.

But they were not alone. A dozen or more of the farm workers were dotted about the meadow, eyeing them curiously. She was powerless.

Summoning up all her skill and experience as an actress, Coral tried to smile. She held her head high and walked on as casually and carelessly as if her world had not fallen into ruins, and as if her heart were not breaking . . .

Meanwhile Gerard had redoubled his pace and soon fell into step beside his sister, trying to make small talk and regain his composure.

"It certainly is a splendid day for the harvest," he remarked.

"Yes, isn't it?" Garnet looked up from the contented baby in her arms, and said softly, "Do you remember helping with the harvest when we were little? Coming home from the fields on top of the cart?"

"Of course I remember . . ."

"We must see that Blaise makes a triumphal return in the wagon when it is loaded. You used to say it was the most thrilling moment of the year. I remember you sitting up on top of the sheaves, declaiming verses at the top of your voice. . . . Do you still recite poetry when you're happy, Gerard?" she asked.

"No," said Gerard, "I don't take much interest in poetry nowadays."

He pulled at a head of corn, and broke some of the seeds open, letting them sift through his fingers. With an effort, he changed the subject.

"It's a pity Brock couldn't come out to join us. He must be very busy, I suppose—with the management of the estate."

Garnet glanced sideways at her brother, her smile fading, aware of the implications in his remark.

"He is busy, yes. . . . But he's not at all well. I think that is why he prefers to stay indoors. He suffers a great deal from an old wound. I've tried to persuade him to see a doctor, but he will not listen to me."

Almost everyone at Rosewood was out in the fields, helping with the harvest or simply enjoying the sunshine, and the house seemed to be deserted when Brock left his study. Slowly, with some difficulty, he negotiated the stairs to the first floor. He had been drinking a little, but he was not in the least drunk. It was not the brandy fumes that clouded his brain, but the inexorable attacks, like a series of hammer blows that seemed as if they would crack his skull.

It was hard to see clearly, under such a repeated onslaught, and he felt dizzy and sick, but he had to go on. He had made up his mind, and there was no turning back now.

At last he reached his goal, and knocked upon the bedroom door.

"Who is it?" called Cassie, from within.

He cleared his throat, and replied, "Broccard Savage. May I speak to you?"

There was a pause, and then Cassie asked him to wait for one moment.

The seconds passed, and Brock felt himself becoming more and more crippled by his disability. He took deep breaths and tried to support himself, putting one hand against the door frame. . . . Perhaps he should

go away and return at some other time, when he was feeling stronger.

He was startled when the door flew open, and Cassie stood smiling at him. "Forgive me for keeping you waiting, Sir Broccard. I had been at my toilette when you knocked, and I was not prepared to receive visitors."

She was dressed in a flowing, frilly peignoir. Brock recognized it with a tremor of distaste. It had once belonged to Garnet, and she had passed it on to Cassie. ("Poor dear, she has no robe-de-chambre, and I have so many fine things to wear. . . .") Brock had a sudden memory of making love to his wife when she was dressed in that selfsame robe, of removing it gently from her joyous, generous body. . . . He looked away, unwilling to dwell upon the thought.

Cassie welcomed him into the room, shutting the door firmly. "Now, sir, I am all attention. Pray, what can I do for you?"

Brock gripped the back of a chair, and forced out the words. "It is not easy for me—to say this . . ."

"Oh, sir—I know I should not interrupt, but—you look very far from well. Won't you please sit down? Can I fetch you something? A glass of water? Some medicine?"

"Nothing, I thank you. But perhaps, it might be better if I . . ." He fumbled, pulling out the chair, and sank into it clumsily.

"Are you sure there is nothing I can get you?" she asked, with concern.

"No, it's of no account—a stupid headache. . . . I will soon shake it off."

She came closer, saying quietly, "Perhaps if you would allow me to do so—I might be able to take the pain from you. . . . I have a little knowledge of such things. I could massage your neck, your shoulders—"

"*That will not be necessary.*" His voice grated un-

pleasantly, and she took a pace back again toward the bed.

"Very well, sir. I only offered, since I have had some success in the past, with this kind of manipulation. . . . But it is for you to decide, naturally."

She sat upon the edge of the bed, waiting politely for him to continue.

He passed a hand over his face, and began again.

"I'm afraid that what I have to say may come as something of a shock to you, Miss Mayne. I do not wish to be unkind, but I see no alternative but to come straight to the point. . . . You have been in my employ, as companion to my wife, for some months now."

"Since June. Yes, sir."

"Since June . . . yes. . . . We met upon the eve of Waterloo, did we not? And I was grateful to you on that occasion, for keeping my wife company in a time of crisis. . . . But those days are over and gone. Our situation now is very different. In short, Miss Mayne, I must tell you that I do not think my wife requires a paid companion any longer."

"What?" She looked at him, wary, alert—like a small, wild animal surprised by a hunter, poised for flight.

"That is why I must ask you to pack your bags and make arrangements to leave this house as soon as possible."

There was a long silence. Somewhere outside, a bird flew up from the shrubbery with a whirr of wings. Then Cassie said evenly, "May I ask why it is you, sir, who chooses to make this communication to me, and not Lady Savage herself?"

Brock felt a vein throbbing in his temple. Every beat of it struck home like a dagger.

"I do not see what consequence that is of yours, but I have taken the responsibility of this decision, and therefore it is my duty to inform you of it."

"Very good, sir. May I then assume that Lady Sav-

age is not entirely in agreement with your decision?"

"You may not!" Brock's hand began to shake, and he clenched his fist angrily upon his lap. "I do not require you to question me. Simply accept what you are told, and obey your instructions. I wish you to leave Rosewood by tomorrow morning at the latest."

"But if Lady Savage does not wish me to go—?"

"I am the master of this house, and you will do as I tell you!" His pulse was racing now. He felt his anger mounting, and his face darkened.

He half-expected her to answer him back. She knew well enough that Rosewood belonged to Garnet and was entailed to any children she might bear. . . . He awaited an impertinent reminder that he was the master of Rosewood by marriage only.

But to his surprise there was another pause, and when Cassie spoke again, her voice was faint and regretful. He screwed up his eyes, trying to see through the mists and dazzling starbursts that fogged his vision—to discover that her expression was one of patient resignation.

"Yes, sir. I understand." She folded her hands in her lap, looking down. "I can only say that I shall be very sad to leave, since you and your wife have shown me nothing but kindness since the day we met . . ."

"Yes—well, there's nothing more to be said." Brock began to lever himself up from his chair, but she stopped him with a tiny gesture.

"Please, sir—before you go—there is one thing more . . ."

"Well?"

"I have another reason for sadness. . . . In all the time I have been here, I have never had the opportunity to tell you something I feel you should know . . . and that is, our first meeting at the ball in Brussels was not entirely fortuitous. . . . I had already made up my mind that I should be introduced to you, before the evening was over."

"How's that?" He could not understand what she meant.

"I had heard your name mentioned. I knew that you were to be present—the famous Major-General Savage! You had a fine reputation, even then."

"You're very civil, miss, but I fail to see what—"

"But as it happened I had a personal reason for wishing to make your acquaintance, as well . . . for we had a mutual friend, so to speak. If 'friend' is the word I want . . ."

Brock made an irritable signal with one hand, trying to cut through this preamble. "Come to the point, if you please. What are you saying?"

"I am saying, sir, that some years ago I had the pleasure of meeting a certain young lady of quality . . . by the name of Lydia Savage . . . your first wife, I believe, Sir Broccard?"

Brock sat as if turned to stone. Cassie smiled at him blandly.

"It is a small world, is it not? I was employed at that time by a family who lived not so very far away from you, in Dorset . . ."

"But—but that's impossible. Lydia was killed in an accident nearly twelve years ago. You could have been little more than a child," he said at last, trying to control the shaking that now threatened to master his body entirely.

"Ah but you forget—as I told you once before, I am a witch." She fixed her gaze upon him, laughing a little. "I have mysterious powers that cannot be explained. I know all sorts of strange secrets . . ."

She was mocking him now, he knew that. But he could not take his eyes from hers, those eyes that seemed to be growing bigger and bigger—palest gray, with an eerie, luminous glow . . .

"Secrets? What secrets?" he repeated hoarsely.

"Shall I give you an example?" Cassie began to repeat a story in a light singsong tone, as if she were reciting a fairytale to a child. "The secret of a young

wife, a very young girl, married to a man much older than herself, a girl who never knew what marriage meant until her honeymoon night. . . . A girl who quickly grew discontented, for she never knew what love meant either, until she met a younger man, near to herself in age though not in station—Nicholas Soames, the youngest coachman in the stables . . .”

“Nicholas Soames . . .” Brock’s voice was a choked whisper.

“A name you hoped never to hear again, perhaps. But nature has its own laws, and pretty Lydia soon fell in love with her Nicholas, and decided to elope with him. They ran off together, on a night of rain and storm, hoping to avoid pursuit, but the river was in spate and broke its banks, and the coach overturned on the flooded road through the valley—smashed to pieces and swept away in the torrent . . . And their bodies were never recovered.”

Brock made one last effort, clawing his way up from the chair through the roaring darkness that threatened to engulf him, and gave a despairing cry. “Why did you have to bring back those things I prefer to forget? . . . Why are you torturing me, why do you tell me all this?”

He towered over her, swaying, as she continued to sit lacing and unlacing her fingers.

“Because there is one thing you do not know, that you have never known. . . . Lydia and her Nicholas were not drowned that night, as you supposed. They managed to survive the crash and escaped to safety. . . . When I met them, they were living together in Yeovil, as man and wife . . .”

Brock uttered a single dreadful sound, as if he were choking, and Cassie concluded calmly, “And there they remain, to this day . . . for your Lydia is still alive . . .”

At that, Brock’s strength failed and he fell unconscious, sprawled half across the bed.

Cassie looked down at him as he lay there, and

nodded her head slightly. She stood up, and proceeded to slip off her loose peignoir. A moment later, she was completely naked.

Next she turned her attention to Brock. Without very much difficulty, she lifted his legs, easing him completely onto the bed, and then began carefully to undress him. . . . She was in no hurry. She had all the time in the world, now.

Chapter Four .

OLD ACQUAINTANCE

He was flying. . . . He was soaring like an eagle, feeling the rush of air upon his body, his arms outstretched.

But at the same moment, he felt a caress upon every part of his skin, and he knew that he was not flying but swimming—floating, rather, for he seemed to exert not the slightest effort, he hung, suspended, in water so warm and pleasant that he experienced no shock, but seemed to exist in the element as if he were a part of it, like a fish. . . . And still some current drew him on, for he sensed that he moved perpetually forward, upward, to the light . . .

He broke the surface and emerged blinking, shaking his head to throw off the drops that clung to his hair—

As he broke out of his dream, and knew reality again.

Brock was naked, and his body was responding to a continual arousal, as two soft hands played upon him: and the sensation of flying—floating—ascending toward a glorious goal—was all too clearly explained. A pair of slim legs encircled his thighs, and he found himself mounting to the final throes of physical frenzy, his breath quickening, his masculinity plunging faster and faster as the moment of release approached. . . . Her hands became claws, her fingernails scratching his shoulder blades, and he heard the sounds of passion as she panted in her ecstasy.

He was looking at her bosom—the nipples as firm and taut as the muscles that lifted her breasts in an

impatient rhythm—and suddenly he found himself staring at an unfamiliar sight. Beneath her right breast, there was a birthmark in the shape of a cloverleaf or a blood-red flower with three petals. Bemused, he lifted his gaze to her face and looked into her eyes: and these were not the eyes of Garnet. They were a stranger's eyes, palest gray, now wide with excitement, exulting in the moment of triumph . . . the eyes of Cassandra Mayne.

In the same instant that he realized this, he reached the point of climax and he could not break free. His body was in command now, and not his mind. As he knew that he had been betrayed into this sensual trap, and as his heart nearly burst with anger and resentment at his own helplessness, so his loins overflowed in a torrent of lust that poured from him like a flood . . . like the raging waters that swept away the coach in which Lydia and her Nicholas had eloped together . . .

The memory of Cassie's words came rushing back to him, and he groaned aloud, his ardour spent, his thoughts tormenting him.

Cassie looked up at him as he pulled himself free, and she laughed quietly. "Well, Sir Broccard?" she said. "You have made an excellent recovery."

He rolled away from her across the bed, and buried his head in his arms, unable to speak.

"Cheer up, sir." Her voice was taunting and light. "I'm sure that my manipulation must have done a great deal to cure your headache . . ."

"What are you saying?" he asked in muffled tones. "What have you done?"

"Why, surely you remember?" She raised herself on one elbow and stretched out her other hand, lazily stroking the nape of his neck. "You were in such discomfort, I persuaded you to let me try my skills upon you. First I massaged your temples, then your shoulders—then your spine—and so on to various other

OLD MOON

parts of your anatomy. . . . And the results were quite remarkable, as I'm sure you must agree . . ."

He lifted his head and looked at her with loathing. "You cunning, cunning bitch," he breathed. "I told you I wished you to leave this house by tomorrow morning. . . . After what has taken place, now you have shown yourself in your true colors, I will not permit you to stay under my roof for another moment. You will pack up and leave immediately."

Then he drew himself up and rose from the bed, finding his clothes strewn upon the floor. As quickly as he could, he began to dress himself, keeping his back turned to her.

"That's not a very friendly attitude to adopt, Sir Broccard, especially after I have been so generous toward you. . . . You *are* feeling better, aren't you? Come, confess, my magic powers have done wonders for you . . ."

He did not deign to answer: and indeed, he would have been ashamed to do so. For although his heart was heavy with guilt and disgust and his mind raced as he tried to think how he should deal with the appalling situation in which he found himself, it was undeniably true that his blinding headache had passed off, and he was feeling physically easier.

She realized that she was not to be granted any reply to her question, and smiled faintly, continuing in the same bantering manner, "Why, I am sure you are an honorable man, and you would never repay generosity with unkindness. . . . I feel certain that when you pause to reflect, you will change your mind. You do not really mean what you say: you cannot turn me out now."

"Because of a vile ruse that you have played upon me? Because you took advantage of my weakness, when I was not in command of myself?" He pulled on his breeches, fastening the buttons rapidly, anxious to leave.

"I was not referring to our moment of intimacy,

sir. . . . I was reverting to a topic we discussed earlier—your first wife, poor Lydia, and her common-law husband.”

“That is no concern of yours, ma’am.” He shrugged into his coat, making for the door, but she interrupted him.

“Oh, but I think it is . . . for I know the lady quite well, and I can easily get in touch with her again. . . . I am also a close friend of your second wife, your wife in *name* only—dear Garnet. . . . Surely you must agree that the subject is one that concerns *her* very much indeed?”

He stopped, the door handle within his grasp, and slowly turned to stare at her.

“You she-devil,” he said at last. “You would not tell Garnet—?”

“That she has never been—can never be—your lawfully wedded wife, as long as Lydia still lives. . . . And that your baby daughter—your precious Ivory—is in truth a child of shame . . .”

“It would be the end of the world for Garnet—”

“I am sure you are right. And that is why I hope I may not be forced to break such unhappy news to her.” Cassie stood up, carelessly throwing her peignoir around her shoulders and knotting the flimsy belt at her waist. “Let me stay at Rosewood, Sir Broccard—and persuade me to hold my tongue.”

“Why, you little—!” He seemed about to make a move toward her, but she held up a warning hand.

“Please do not let your feelings run away with you, sir. . . . Can we not agree to keep this as our own secret? For Garnet’s sake, and the sake of your child?”

He stood as if turned to stone, realizing he was powerless to fight against this evil woman.

“Oh, and there is one other thing . . .” Cassie concluded. “I find it quite hard to manage on the small salary you pay me now. No doubt you can see your

way to increasing my income. Shall we agree to double my present wages?"

She sat at the dressing table and began to brush her long, corn-colored hair, before putting it up into its chignon again.

He flung the door open without a word and left the room. She stared at her reflection in the glass, and nodded, well satisfied. Everything had worked out exactly as she had planned it.

Over dinner that night, Garnet noticed that Brock was even more preoccupied and grim-faced. He hardly spoke throughout the meal, and she was hard put to it to keep the conversation flowing. Still, at least he had not made any further reference to Cassie's departure. She must be thankful, for that, at any rate.

"The weather seems likely to continue unbroken for at least one more day," Garnet announced, as the servants removed the entree dishes. "And that means—with luck—they will finish harvesting tomorrow. . . . I hear that great preparations are being made for a feast in the old barn when the job is done. Do you remember the harvest-home suppers we used to have when we were children, Gerard?"

"Of course." Gerard's reply was curt and noncommittal. He was almost as silent as Brock himself, Garnet thought, and she wondered what was troubling him.

Coral, too, was pale and withdrawn, reluctant to be drawn into the general conversation. Only Cassie seemed sunny and carefree, discoursing cheerfully and amusingly upon each new topic that arose. Not for the first time, Garnet thanked her good fortune for Cassie. What would she have done without her?

"I saw the moon rising before I came down to dinner," Cassie was saying. "So low on the horizon, it seemed to be caught up among the branches of the trees, like a great golden air-balloon. . . . Oh, no—perhaps it looked more like a pumpkin, for it is a harvest moon, after all."

ROSEWOOD

"Below stairs, I believe some of the servants call it the Devil's moon!" Garnet added. "It's an old superstition, I fancy, though of course nobody takes it seriously nowadays . . ."

"I should hope not!" Cassie protested gaily. "We don't want His Satanic Majesty intruding upon us at Rosewood. We'll have no devilment here, I trust!"

At that, Brock—who had scarcely seemed aware of what was being said—lifted his strong, leonine head and stared across the table at Cassie, his expression so strange and enigmatic that she fell silent and lowered her gaze.

There was a momentary hush, and nobody spoke.

Garnet broke the silence by saying, "It must be either twenty past the hour, or twenty to—isn't that what they say? When an angel passes overhead?"

"Or a devil . . ." said Brock, almost in a whisper.

Up in their bedroom, an hour or so later, Gerard and Coral prepared to retire for the night.

Coral stood at the window, looking out at the huge circle of the moon, a golden guinea hanging in the night sky, and she shivered.

"Come away, you'll catch cold," said Gerard, undressing.

She stretched her arms, smothering a yawn. "I'm not cold. . . . It's odd, even now, these autumn evenings are almost like summer. . . . It's not natural at all."

He watched her, and felt a sudden surge of love as he saw the slender form of her body outlined through her nightgown, against the moonlight. She moved to the bed, and found him gazing at her.

"Dearest Coral," he began quietly, "I wish . . ."

"What?" she encouraged him to continue.

"I wish I could tell you . . ." He broke off, and sighed. "No, it's of no importance. Take no notice of me."

OLD MOON

She came closer, determined to get to the root of the problem, whatever it might be.

"Tell me what it is that troubles you . . . please," she urged him.

"It's nothing at all. . . . Everything is perfectly fine."

He picked up his nightshirt, which lay folded across the pillow, and shook it out, about to pull it over his head.

"No, don't—" Coral caught his arm. "Don't bother with that."

"What do you mean?"

She took the garment from his hands and tossed it onto the bedside table.

"Come to bed with me just as you are at this moment. . . . Who needs nightgowns, for heaven's sake? I'm sure I don't."

And to prove her point, she slipped the straps of her own flimsy negligee from her creamy shoulders, letting it fall with a hiss of silk to her ankles. Then she held out her arms to him.

"Come, husband, take me to bed."

He stared at her and smiled. She was still the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, and he knew a moment of joyful pride as he surveyed the full display of her perfect figure—her small, rounded breasts; the slender waist curving opulently to the promise of her soft, generous hips. . . . It was too dark now to see the details of her loveliness—the hue of her nipples, coral-colored, as he had discovered the very first time he laid eyes upon her, the shining copper curls of her hair, flowing lavishly over her shoulders, the darker, sensuous tones of the tresses that shadowed the precious mystery of her sex . . .

"Take me . . ." she repeated, so softly that he could scarcely hear the words.

They lay upon the bed together, and he began to make love to her in the timeless ritual that they had discovered through the years. He kissed her face, her eyelids, her nose and chin; he nuzzled the tender

places of her neck and traced with his tongue the sensitive, shell-like pattern of her ears, while she shuddered with delight and clung to him.

Now, she thought, I know that I have been worrying foolishly—all for nothing. . . . He still loves me, just as he has always loved me. Nothing can ever change that.

He found her mouth and began kisses of another kind, his sweet lips meeting hers, his tongue teasing, entering, possessing her utterly.

She responded instantly, opening herself to his ardor, returning his caresses with light, playful touches of her own—her delicate fingertips tickling his spine, running slowly down to his hips, exploring the warm, velvety cleft below, then across his muscular flanks to his flat belly, his rough, upspringing body hair, and within that—

Nothing . . .

His manhood was not aroused by her touch. She toyed and teased, playing with him, plying him with every kind of stimulation, but—

Nothing . . .

Some time later, she had to admit defeat. This must be the end of their love game for tonight. She could do no more to excite him.

Of course, they both agreed that it did not matter—it meant nothing at all. He was overtired, he was worried, he had so many problems on his mind—and they agreed to give up their attempts at satisfaction and get some sleep instead.

But Coral did not sleep for a long while. She lay on her back, wide awake, staring up at the ceiling. All the doubts and suspicions she thought she had vanquished now came clustering in upon her once more.

“He may love me in his own way . . . but he no longer desires me. Because he desires someone else . . .”

There was no other explanation that she could think of.

The next morning, the house party took themselves off to the fields again for the final day of the harvest. Only Brock stayed behind—having business to attend to, as he explained to Garnet—but everyone else gathered down by the long meadow, watching the harvesters at work.

As the line of reapers advanced upon the sea of corn, slowly reducing the area of the standing grain, yard by yard, young rabbits took refuge in the dwindling cover, and then made a final dash for freedom.

One of the farmhands, perched upon a five-barred gate, took careful aim with a shotgun and fired each time a brown-furred streak with white scut flying pelted out across the stubble. By the end of the day, he would have bagged enough to make a dozen huge rabbit pies.

Blaise watched, enchanted, and crowed with joy as each helpless victim fell to the bullet, giving a shout of surprise at every explosion, and clapping his hands.

"You're a heartless little scamp," Coral scolded him. "You don't care at all for the poor bunny rabbits, do you?"

"Can I be a farmer when I grow up, Papa? And have a gun? Can I, Papa? Oh, do say yes!" Blaise clutched at Gerard's knees eagerly as he sat in the shade of a hedgerow.

"Be off with you, boy, and stop bothering me!" Gerard said roughly, thrusting the child aside. "It's too hot to play games and I'm in no mood for your nonsense."

Undaunted, Blaise pulled a dead twig from the hedge and put it to his shoulder, mimicking the shotgun he so much admired.

"Bang!" he shouted aggressively, pointing the stick along the line of the cornstalks. "*Bang!*"

"Don't be cross with him," Coral interceded on the boy's behalf. "He's full of high spirits, that's all."

"And I'm in low spirits, so he'd better watch out," said Gerard shortly.

"I know *that* well enough," replied Coral. "Oh, Gerard, darling Gerard, it's this place that's dragging you down, just as it does to me. . . . There's something in the air that doesn't suit us. Let's make arrangements to travel back to Ireland as soon as possible."

"Ireland? Don't talk nonsense," muttered Gerard. "This is my home. I live here. . . . Why should I leave Rosewood?"

"Because you're unhappy here . . . because *I'm* unhappy . . . because I ask you to!" she countered. "Is that reason enough for you?"

He shrugged this aside, refusing to take her seriously. "You don't know what you're saying. You're as bad as the child, forever pestering. . . . Why can't you leave me in peace?"

She bowed her head. "Very well, Gerard. If that's what you want. . . . I have to go to the village in any case. I wrote a letter to Rosalie this morning, before you were awake, and I must see that it is dispatched."

"To Rosalie?" He looked up sharply. "What have you to say to her?"

"Why, just the latest news of us all—especially news of Blaise. She must be worried about him. I want to put her mind at rest by telling her that we are all well, and happy. . . . Look after him till I return, Gerard."

"Yes, yes, of course—stop fussing!"

Gerard shifted restlessly in the long grass, trying to make himself comfortable. Coral turned and walked off—there was nothing more to be said.

Indoors, Brock sat at the desk in his study, entering up the household accounts in a ledger and trying to concentrate on the figures, but his mind kept wandering, and he found himself thinking of Cassie Mayne.

Each time, his heart pounded and his blood seemed to be on fire—but not, certainly not!—because he was enamored of the creature. The passion that stirred him was not lust, but hatred. He thought back over the events of the previous day—his illness, his weakness. He remembered how he had been seduced into that

OLD MOON

one moment of insane desire. He recalled the birth-mark under her breast, the fierce claims of her body, the laughing cruelty in her eyes . . . and he wished she were dead.

But she was very much alive—and so was Lydia.

Pretty, childish, irresponsible Lydia . . .

He had loved her once, but that was long ago. He had loved her for her girlish innocence and her simplicity, but innocence was corrupted all too soon and simplicity turned to deceit. When he discovered that she had been cuckolding him with the young coachman, he had fallen into a paroxysm of rage and jealousy. He had wanted to kill the blackguard with his bare hands, taking him by the throat and choking the life from him . . .

But then he thought again, and he knew he could not attempt any kind of revenge, for it would never induce Lydia to love him as she loved that boy—and any revenge would be bitter and useless. Had it, perhaps, been his own fault in some way? Had he been too eager, too importunate in his love? Had he frightened her by his demands? Had she turned inevitably to a less possessive suitor? Or was it simply that Nicholas Soames was handsome and attractive, and that she had turned to his young body with relief?

He tried to imagine her now, living with Soames as his wife—twelve years older, but still as fair and lovely . . .

But he could conjure up no clear image of Lydia. Only one face kept returning to his mind—Garnet's face, Garnet's expression of horror and disbelief if she ever discovered the truth about their relationship . . . the truth about their child . . .

He pushed aside the account books angrily. How could he concentrate on the figures now! He must try to think what to do, he must devise a plan to deal with this situation.

Perhaps a walk in the fresh air would clear his head.

He went out of the study and began to descend the main staircase to the entrance hall.

The front door was wide open, and a young man stood looking about him uncertainly, a young captain, in the dress uniform of Brock's old regiment, the Third Dragoon Guards. Pink-faced and slightly ill-at-ease, the youngster gazed up at Brock and sketched an uncertain salute.

"Major-General Savage, good day to you, sir . . ."

"Don't give me that rank, if you please," snapped Brock. "For I have resigned my commission. I am no longer a serving soldier."

"So I'm informed, sir, and I was sorry to hear it," said the captain. "But I must congratulate you upon your new title, I believe—Sir Broccard?"

"Thank you," said Brock shortly. "Forgive me, but I don't recall. Have I had the pleasure of your acquaintance?"

"I don't blame you for having forgotten me, sir," replied the captain. "I'm something of an old acquaintance indeed. It's four years since I first served under your command, in the Peninsular—and I was only an ensign then. . . . Richard Blades, sir, known to my messmates as Dicky."

"Dicky Blades?" Brock frowned. "Yes, it seems to me I recall your name—"

"I happened to be passing through this neighborhood, and I was told that you lived at Rosewood, so I decided to break my journey to pay my respects. I'm on leave, you see, sir. I disembarked at Portsmouth, and I'm now heading back to my own home and family at Kenilworth."

"You've a long journey ahead of you then, Captain. . . . Perhaps we can prevail upon you to stay here with us for a night or two," Brock said politely. "As you see, we have plenty of room for visitors."

"That is exceedingly civil of you, sir. I should like that very much indeed." Dicky replied, flushing with pleasure and suddenly looking like the bashful young

ensign again. "If you're sure it will not cause any inconvenience . . . ?"

"Not at all. We have guests already, and you're very welcome to join the party." Brock spoke automatically, his thoughts still very much caught up with Garnet—and Lydia . . . "You mentioned your family a moment ago. Do I take it that you too have become a married man?"

"Not exactly, sir, but I hope to be, before this leave is over. . . . I have a fiancée awaiting me. Penelope, the dearest, sweetest girl in all the world, and one of the best horsewomen in Warwickshire. We met when riding to hounds last winter. She has an excellent seat."

"I'm delighted to hear it," said Brock absently. "And I wish you both joy for the future. . . . I have acquired a wife and a daughter since last we met, so I speak from happy personal experience."

He broke off. Through the open door, he could see Garnet coming across the lawn toward the house with their baby in her arms. Then his face darkened, as he saw Cassie following close behind her.

"There is my wife now," he added. "Perhaps you would care to go out and make yourself known to her, for I have some urgent business on hand. You'll forgive me, I'm sure." He turned on his heel and made his escape. Cassandra Mayne was the last person in the world he wished to speak to at this moment.

Dicky Blades stared in surprise at his host's abrupt departure, but then decided to follow his suggestion and step outside to meet Lady Savage.

There were two women walking across the lawn. One carried a baby, and had her face shaded by a wide-brimmed straw hat. . . . Probably that would be the child's nursemaid. The other was a slim, blonde girl with dark eyelashes, and Dicky advanced upon her, holding out his hand.

"Lady Savage?" he began. "You must excuse my boldness, but your husband has told me to introduce

myself. I serve in his old regiment, and we soldiered together in Spain and Portugal—Captain Richard Blades . . .”

“You’re mistaken, Captain,” said the blonde girl, appraising him with a swift glance. “My name is Cassandra Mayne. This is Lady Savage.”

Dicky turned his head, saw Garnet clearly for the first time, and his jaw sagged.

“Good God,” he blurted out, then caught himself up, stammering in confusion. “I beg your pardon, ma’am. I was taken by surprise—the resemblance is so very marked. . . . I am sure you must have a twin brother who was also in the same regiment. He and I were ensigns together, some time ago—”

Garnet had by now recovered from her initial shock and was beginning to enjoy herself.

“I have a brother who served with the Dragoons, certainly, but he’s not my twin,” she replied with a smile. “Cassie, my dear, would you be very kind and take Ivory back to the nursery? I believe it is almost time for her bath.”

“Of course.” Cassie took the baby in her arms, and prepared to leave. “I hope I may see you again, Captain, before you depart?”

“I think it’s more than likely, ma’am, for Sir Brocard has been good enough to invite me to stay at Rosewood for a few nights.”

“How very nice. I shall look forward to making your acquaintance when we both have more leisure,” said Cassie, and then set off toward the house.

“I’m delighted you are to be our guest, Captain Blades,” said Garnet demurely. “You will be able to meet my brother—Gerard Mallory—for he is staying here also.”

“Really?” Dicky frowned, and offered his arm as they strolled on across the sunny greensward. “But you must have another brother, surely, for the chap I’m thinking of went by the name of Garnet . . .

Garnet Mallory. A curious name, quite unique, I always thought."

"Absolutely unique," Garnet corrected him. "There's only one of me. . . . Don't you recognize me yet, Dicky?"

He stopped dead, as if he had been struck by lightning, and stared at her full in the face.

"Why—yes, I thought—I mean, I couldn't help wondering—but it's impossible!" he babbled. "I mean to say—dammit, Garnet—he—you—you're a *girl*!"

"Oh, my dear Dicky," smiled Garnet. "Has it really taken you four years to make that discovery?"

"But I—we—that is to say, you and I—we both—"

"Yes, Dicky. We both soldiered together—as comrades-in-arms. . . . Just think! All that time we shared lodgings, ship's cabins. Why, I recall we even slept curled up under the same blanket, on one occasion. And you never even guessed . . ."

Captain Richard Blades, now brick-red in the face, opened and shut his mouth several times, but was incapable of speech.

"Come now!" Garnet took his arm again and led him toward the rose garden. "It's a shame to tease you. . . . Let us find a shady place where we can sit and talk, and I will tell you the whole story."

Gerard, too, was looking for a place in the shade, for the sun was almost directly overhead, and his cool retreat beneath the hedge had disappeared. Irritably, he made his way along the field path to the old farm wagon that stood by the gate. It was already piled high with sheaves of corn, throwing a deep shadow to one side.

He walked around into the shade, taking off his jacket, and flung it down carelessly. There was an indignant protest, in a shrill, feminine voice.

"Watch out, can't you? Oh—beg pardon, Master Gerard!"

The protest tailed off into a giggle, and Gerard

found himself face to face with Lucy Ashe. She had been lying half-hidden among the sheaves, and he had thrown his jacket on top of her.

Now she spread it out on the ground beside her.

"Did you want to sit down and rest awhile?" she asked artlessly. "That's what I been doing. . . . The sun was so hot, I left the others working and crept away to take it easy for a bit . . ."

"You look as if you're taking things very easily," he commented.

She followed the direction of his glance, looking down at the front of her simple print dress. The bodice was unlaced, and her breasts had tumbled free from the restraining material, pink and pretty, two luscious orbs that seemed an open invitation to pleasure . . .

"Oh, well, I was all in a muck sweat, see—and I had to cool off for a while." She dimpled provocatively. "But there's no harm in it, is there? Come and sit here beside me, Master Gerard, and keep me company . . ."

Gerard hesitated, then obeyed.

It was, after all, very much more pleasant here, out of the sun. He stretched out beside her, lying back upon his jacket, and feeling the cut end of the stubble pricking him through the material.

"Ain't you feeling the heat too, just a little?" Lucy cooed, wide-eyed, and rolled a little closer to him. "Why don't you do as I do, and make yourself comfortable? For I'm sure your clothes must be very tight and stuffy on a day like this . . ."

Gerard laughed. "Lucy Ashe, you're a wanton baggage, and you should be ashamed of yourself!"

She pouted playfully.

"Why, there's a thing to say to a poor girl. I declare, I don't know what you mean . . . and anyhow I wager you feel the same way, deep down—don't you?"

"Do I?" he repeated slowly.

She was closer still now, and he could smell the sweet, spicy aroma of her breasts, and the animal warmth of her body, only a few inches away from his own.

"Don't you feel the same as you used to—when you was young?" she whispered and stretched out a hand inquiringly.

"Gerard! Gerard, where are you?"

Coral's voice broke in upon them, disturbing their idyll, and a moment later she appeared around the corner of the wagon, standing over them, tense and frightened.

Gerard scrambled to his feet, and Lucy turned away, adjusting her clothes quickly. Coral took in the situation at a glance, but she thrust this revelation from her mind. There was something much more important to worry about at the moment.

"Gerard—for heaven's sake, where's Blaise? Have you seen him?"

"Blaise? What? No—why?"

"I told you to look after him. I left him with you. How could you be so stupid? . . . He's disappeared!"

Gerard looked left and right, but of course there was no sign of the boy.

He called out loudly, "Blaise! Where are you?"

There was no reply—except for the sudden explosion of the shotgun, startling them both as another rabbit met its doom.

They looked at one another, and there was sheer terror in Coral's eyes.

"Mother of God. . . . What can have happened to him?"

Chapter Five

HARVEST HOME

Garnet and Dicky Blades sat side by side within a leafy arbor at the end of the rose garden, while she told him the amazing story of her masquerade as "Ensign" Garnet Mallory. How she had gone off to the wars in disguise in order to find her true love, but in course of her quest had fallen out of love with Edmund Challoner, and instead fallen deeply, head-over-heels, in love with the only man in her life—Brock Savage.

"I heard you had changed your plans and gone to America with him on the troopship," Dicky reflected. "I thought at the time it was a rum go. . . . But now I understand."

"I'm glad that you do," said Garnet and put one hand on his arm. "For I always felt a little ashamed that I should have had to deceive you for so long—you who were my best of friends, all that long while."

"You managed it very well, I must say. You had me completely bamboozled!" Dicky broke into a sudden grin, and Garnet smiled back with relief.

Suddenly he had stopped being the prim, proper captain of Dragoons, and become once more the scapegrace young ensign she knew so well—not much more than a schoolboy himself.

"And you fooled all the other fellows in the Mess, I'm sure of that," he continued, laughing. "Why—that night when we arrived in Madrid and Gray Edgecombe introduced us all to the delights of that bordello, we none of us suspected—"

OLD MOON

He broke off, and cleared his throat in some embarrassment.

"I say—I do beg your pardon, ma'am. . . . I should not have referred to such a thing in your presence."

"Why not? Since we both entered the establishment together? Besides, you must remember I am a married woman now, with a husband and a child. I am very far from being shocked by such topics, Dicky!"

"I suppose so. . . . All the same, it does seem a bit weird, don't it? Discussing—well—that sort of thing, with a respectable lady. . . . Look here, old chap—" He broke off in confusion. "Oh, there I go—I'm so used to thinking of you as a messmate, it's difficult to sort myself out!"

Garnet threw back her head and laughed. She had taken off her sun hat, and her shining chestnut-brown curls shimmered and danced in ringlets that fell to her shoulders.

"If you want to go on thinking of me as an 'old chap,' I shan't be in the least offended!" she assured him.

He looked at her, and smothered a curse.

"Beg pardon again, old lad—I mean, milady—but when I think back to all those days and nights we spent together—especially the nights—I could kick myself for being such a blind, stupid idiot, don't you know?"

Garnet looked down demurely; the corners of her mouth twitched as she replied: "Perhaps it's as well that you did *not* discover my secret, Dicky. There were many occasions when I was in mortal terror that you would penetrate my disguise. . . ."

"You mean like that evening in the bordello? Good lord, now I recall, you actually went up to one of the bedrooms with the prettiest girl in the house. How did you manage to avoid exposure on that occasion?" he wanted to know.

"I had to throw myself upon her mercy. I told Melita everything, and she agreed to help me. . . ."

though I fancy you yourself were 'helped' that night, too, by the proprietress, no less!"

Dicky began to blush. "You remember that, do you? Bless you, I suppose you must have discovered a good deal about me, and seen a good deal too—"

"Oh, yes. Have you forgotten how we shared that tiny cabin together, upon the ship that took us to Portugal? I had only just met you for the first time, but due to our enforced proximity, I soon came to know you very well indeed—and in great detail!"

Dicky thought back—and remembered with shocking clarity how he had behaved during that voyage. When he was not prostrated by seasickness, he had indulged in the most scandalous horseplay, exposing himself without a qualm and boasting lewdly of his sexual exploits . . .

His blushes redoubled: his complexion turned to beetroot.

"My God!" he blurted out. "You must know more about me than any other female in the whole world. You know me a damn sight better than dear old Penny!"

"Who?" Garnet asked.

"Oh, I forgot—you don't know that I'm engaged to be married—to Miss Penelope Duff, of the Kenilworth Duffs. . . . We rode to hounds together."

"I'm very glad for you, and for her," said Garnet, with complete sincerity. "You may tell her from me that she is a fortunate young lady. . . . And you may add that I speak as one who knows you—intimately . . ."

Dicky mopped his brow and puffed out his cheeks. "Phew! I don't think I'll mention *that* to her—but thanks all the same."

A footfall on the gravel made them look up. Cassie Mayne stood outside the arbor, eyeing them both curiously.

"Yes, Cassie, what is it? Has Ivory been bathed and settled for her nap?"

"Yes, she's asleep in her cot now . . . but I was sent to find you—" Cassie cast one more look at Dicky's embarrassed countenance, and then concentrated on the matter in hand. "There is a crisis."

"Why? What has happened?"

"Your brother and his wife are both in an extreme state of agitation. It seems that their little boy has disappeared. He cannot be found anywhere."

"Oh, heavens!" Garnet rose quickly. "Forgive me, Dicky, I must go at once."

Once more Cassie's face reflected a lively interest. Surely Garnet had achieved an unusual degree of familiarity with Captain Blades in a very short space of time . . . ?

"That's perfectly all right, old ch—I beg your pardon—Lady Savage, I should say. Please don't concern yourself about me. I'll just sit here and—and *think*—for a while. Think over the matters we have been discussing . . ."

They left him sitting in the arbor, still looking almost stunned, as he began to piece together all his old memories of comradeship with Garnet, and wincing time and again at each new revelation of their ambiguous relationship.

"Hell's teeth!" he decided at length. "What a fool I was . . . and what an opportunity I missed!"

When Garnet and Cassie reached the home farm, they found everyone in an uproar. The harvesters had temporarily abandoned their work. Every available man and woman had been recruited to join the search.

Coral, who did not know the lie of the land, felt completely helpless, and this only increased her growing sense of panic.

"How long is it since you last saw him, Gerard?" she asked, with a note of suppressed hysteria in her voice. "You must remember that, surely? Five minutes ago? Ten? Half an hour, even? How far could he have gone by this time?"

In contrast, Gerard was saying very little. His jaw

ROSEWOOD

was set, and he answered briefly, "I can't remember, I tell you. . . . It was very warm. I may have dozed off for a few minutes. . . . He could be anywhere by now."

Garnet attempted to tackle the problem sensibly and systematically, telling the various farmhands, "Gregory, do you take Pru and Polly and search the long meadow. Rosie, go back to the garden. Look in the greenhouse—Blaise is fond of peaches, he might have gone to find some for himself."

"What about the fishpond?" Gerard asked, tight-lipped. "Do you suppose he could have tried to paddle in the water?"

Coral put her hand to her mouth, as if to stifle a cry.

Garnet broke in swiftly, "I hope not, but we must make certain. Where's young Pip?" She found the boot-boy, the youngest member of the Rosewood staff, and gave him directions. "You have the fastest legs. Run and look by the fishpond . . ."

There was a moment of horror when two of the maids began to wail and cry. They had come upon a dark patch among the grasses, wet with fresh blood. Luckily this proved to be a false alarm, for it was the spot where the marksman with a shotgun had set down the rabbits he had killed. But by this time Coral was on the verge of tears herself, and her hands were shaking.

"If anything has happened to Blaise," she began, in a choked whisper, and could not go on. Under her breath she began to pray: "Hail Mary, full of grace . . ."

A few minutes later, there was a cheerful shout, and the mood changed completely. "Here he be—safe and sound!" cried Jem Bolt.

Jem marched through the gate, with the missing boy riding upon his shoulders, completely carefree and unconcerned.

OLD MOON

"Thank God—oh, thank God," gasped Coral. "Where was he?"

"Like Little Boy Blue in the old rhyme," announced Jem with a guffaw. "Under the haystack, fast asleep!"

They soon learned what had happened. Blaise had wandered away and taken refuge from the sunshine in the shadow of a haystack. Overcome by drowsiness, he had nodded off and slept through the entire hue and cry that followed.

Coral hugged him to her breast, scolding and petting him at the same time. Her prayer had been answered, but it would be a long time before she recovered from this terrifying experience.

Now the harvesters could resume their work, and they set to with a will. As the day wore on, it became apparent that the fields would finally be cleared before nightfall. Tonight they would celebrate Harvest Home, with supper in the old barn.

Garnet went into the kitchen with Cassie to supervise the preparation of the food, checking the bill-of-fare with Mrs. Bolt: game pies, rabbit pies, roast capon, roast ducklings, salt beef, and mutton stew with dumplings. It was to be a feast indeed.

"And to follow, my lady, cook is making a dish of syllabub and another of frumenty, with plenty of home-brewed beer and cider to wash it down," beamed the plump housekeeper.

"That sounds quite splendid," said Garnet. "Now all I have to do is to make sure that the barn has been swept and decorated. I asked my brother to see to the arrangements there, but he has had other things on his mind today. Perhaps we should take a walk over to the farmstead, Cassie, to make certain."

"With pleasure," said Cassie.

As they set off on the long path through the garden, passing the arbor among the rose bushes, Cassie remarked, "I had almost forgotten your new guest, Captain Blades. . . . Will he be attending the harvest supper also?"

"I imagine so. Dicky's not one to miss any opportunity of merrymaking," said Garnet, smiling.

"Dicky?" Cassie repeated the name, giving it a meaningful inflection.

"Yes, that is his name—Captain Richard Blades—but he's generally known to his friends as Dicky," said Garnet.

"Ah, I had not realized you were such a close friend of the Captain's?" Cassie pursued the topic lightly.

"Oh—well, we met many years ago, when the Captain was a young ensign, on active service. I think I told you that I traveled with Brock in the Peninsular?"

"You did, but I don't quite understand how that can be, for when the Captain arrived this morning, he assumed for a moment that *I* was Lady Savage. . . . Surely, if you had met already—"

"Oh, dear!" Garnet stopped short. "Well, Cassie, I can see I shall have to let you into a family secret." She took both Cassie's hands in her own, and continued, "It's really of no importance, but—you will soon understand why Brock and I prefer to keep this particular story to ourselves. May I ask you, please, never to repeat to a soul what I am about to tell you?"

"You know you may rely upon me," said Cassie smoothly.

"Of course I know that, and that is why I can speak in confidence," said Garnet warmly. "It's not really such a shameful revelation. It has its comical side, in fact, although I'm not sure that Dicky found it altogether amusing this morning."

Then she plunged in and told Cassie the whole story, just as she had related it to Dicky and concluded, "There! Now you know everything—and so you should, for we have never kept any secrets from one another. . . . But perhaps, to spare Dicky's blushes, you had better keep it to yourself and pretend not to know."

"Very well." Cassie's color was a little heightened, and her eyes seemed unusually bright, but she spoke

OLD MOON

with her usual composure. "It is, after all, no concern of mine. . . . I shall not breathe a word."

At the old barn, Gerard was giving instructions to some of the older men, whose work in the fields was already over.

"Put up the long trestle tables, on three sides, like so . . . and set benches along them, to seat as many as possible. . . . Then tell the girls to bring in the garlands they have been weaving—flowers and greenery, to decorate the beams overhead."

"And corn dollies, Master Gerard. We got to have the corn dollies, to keep the men lusty and the women-folk contented!" chuckled old Ebenezer.

He indicated a little heap of these rustic ornaments close at hand: cornstalks that had been twisted and plaited into strange shapes by deft fingers, some in the form of dancing men or maidens, and one or two that were blatantly phallic in design. For these corn dollies had a history that stretched back to pagan times, and they invoked the blessing of a primitive deity for fertility to the crops and the beasts . . . and to the young lads and lasses who joined together to bring the harvest home.

"That will be enough of that, Ebb," said Gerard, not unkindly, for he heard a familiar voice at the open doorway and did not wish to continue with this topic.

The newcomer was Coral, and Gerard's face hardened as he saw the look in her eyes.

"Where have you been hiding yourself?" she asked him.

"Nowhere—what do you mean?"

"As if it weren't bad enough that Blaise should run away and get lost. I began to think you were playing at hide-and-seek too."

Her words were trivial enough, for the benefit of the listening farmhands, but Gerard could sense that she was in deadly earnest.

"Garnet asked me to come and give a hand here—setting up for the feast tonight," he began.

"Garnet. Oh, yes, of course. You have to do what Garnet tells you, no doubt . . . since she is the mistress of the house."

Gerard recognized the danger signals in her tone, and said quickly, "All right, Ebb—and the rest of you—be off now, and fetch the trestles and the benches. We'll set them up later."

"Very good, Master Gerard." The men shuffled out into the fading afternoon light, muttering amongst themselves.

When they were alone, Gerard rounded on his wife. "Do you have to criticize my sister in front of the servants? Surely you know better than to behave so thoughtlessly?"

"Oh, pardon me—" she burst out with bitter irony. "I have so little experience of the way one behaves toward the lower classes. Perhaps because I am one of their number!"

"Stop being so idiotic, Coral."

"Idiotic, am I?" Coral advanced upon him, her green eyes blazing. "Idiot I may be, but I'm not blind. I saw you and that little trollop lying together in the long grass this morning—with her bosom sticking so far out of her dress, it looked like her backside!"

"Hold your tongue!" Gerard began to lose his temper. "You're talking rubbish. . . . Anyway, where is Blaise now? I thought you'd be afraid to let him out of your sight after this morning's excitement."

"Blaise is already tucked up in his bed and settled down for the night—and don't you dare change the subject, Gerard Mallory. You were all ready to start pleasuring that girl when I interrupted you."

"That's a lie!"

"So I'm a liar as well as an idiot! That settles it. I'm not staying here to be insulted. I'm going back to the house this minute and I'll pack my bags . . ."

"What? Where are you going?"

"Home to Ireland—where I belong! And I'll take that poor motherless child with me."

"Don't be a fool!"

He gripped her arms, and she struggled furiously. They were almost fighting when Garnet walked in upon them, with Cassie at her heels.

"What ever is the matter?" she asked. "What is wrong?"

Between his teeth, Gerard replied angrily, "Coral's got a crazy idea in her head about going back to Ireland. I've told her she's a fool but—"

"I'm not staying here where I'm not wanted!" Coral burst out. "And you can't stop me. None of you!"

"My dear Coral, please don't do anything hasty," Garnet began. "I'm quite sure you don't really mean that. Of course we want you here—"

"And that's another black lie." Coral was beyond all reason now. "You hate and despise me. Be honest! And I'm *not* your dear Coral, and never will be. . . . You've looked down your pretty nose at me from the first minute I arrived."

"That's not true!" Now it was Garnet's turn to get indignant. "I was prepared to welcome you with open arms, as Gerard's wife, but you've spurned every gesture of friendship I made. All because you were jealous of me for having inherited the estate!"

"And isn't it the truth? You wheedled your way into your father's good books, no doubt, and persuaded him to cut Gerard out of his will—"

"How dare you!" Garnet clenched her fists. "No wonder you wish to leave Rosewood. Your spite and envy must make life here unbearable for you—"

"*That's* not why I'm leaving!" retorted Coral. "And he knows it!"

She pointed an accusing finger at Gerard.

"Why then?" pursued Garnet.

Coral hesitated for the first time and took a breath, then she said, "I'm not telling you . . . it's between him and me. . . . But believe me, I'll be heartily glad

to shake the dust of this place from my shoes. And I hope I never set eyes on you again as long as I live!"

With that, she swung around and marched out of the barn, just as the little group of workmen returned with the trestle tables. They fell back to let her pass and watched as she shouldered her way through, her head held high.

An hour later, Garnet sat at her dressing table and recounted the whole unhappy tale to Brock.

". . . She was beside herself with fury. I've never seen anyone in such a black rage. . . . She really is quite impossible. Cassie was right—she's resented us all along."

"Cassie?" Brock, sitting upon the bed, looked up, and his expression was dangerous. "What has Cassie to do with it, pray?"

"Nothing at all, except that she has tried to warn me ever since Coral arrived. She told me what a sullen, ungrateful creature she is!" Garnet was attempting to put on her necklace, as she dressed for the evening, but her hands trembled so much that she found it hard to fasten the clasp. "Oh—I can't manage this, Brock, do help me."

He stood up, undecided, and she glanced at his reflection in the mirror.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked. "You've been very quiet all the time I was talking. Do you believe I was wrong to speak so frankly to my sister-in-law? Do you suppose I could be mistaken about her?"

Brock shook his head slowly, wrestling with problems of his own. "I was thinking—about Miss Mayne . . ." he said at last.

"Cassie? What about her?"

"I have to go and see her—now, this evening. . . . She left a message for me, and I know what she wants."

Garnet frowned, puzzled. "Cassie left you a message? I don't understand—what message?"

"She wishes to see me on a matter of business. She wants me to pay her wages," Brock replied awkwardly.

"Oh, is that all! You looked so strangely, I thought for a moment there was something wrong. . . . Well, you can see to that later, surely. Do come and help me fasten my necklace—and give me a kiss, for I need your love and your comfort this evening. I don't like being on bad **terms** with anyone, and when it comes to a quarrel with **Gerard's** wife, of all people—"

She broke off, seeing that Brock was no longer listening. He was walking away from her, toward the door. She turned to stare at him. "Brock, where are you going? Didn't you hear what I—"

"I told you. I have to see your companion. . . . I owe her some money," said Brock, over his shoulder, and he went out of the bedroom.

Garnet gazed into the lookingglass, almost in despair. What was the matter with everyone tonight? Why was Brock so brusque and unhelpful? What made Gerard cold and distant—and Coral so vindictive?

She put her head in her hands. The necklace didn't matter. She had changed her mind—she would not go to the harvest supper tonight after all. She could not face them . . . any of them!

In the event, there were three empty places at the supper table. Garnet retired to bed early, pleading a headache, and Coral did not put in an appearance either. Brock himself made excuses on his wife's behalf, and said a few words to thank the farmers for their hard work. He wished them well and hoped they would have a pleasant evening, then took himself off to his study. He had, as always, a great deal of business to attend to.

So the family was represented by Gerard, who presided, pale and unsmiling, at the head of the table. On his left sat the principal guest, Captain Richard Blades, resplendent in a velvet tailcoat, and on his right sat Cassandra Mayne, in the place of honor.

She had never looked more bewitching.

The barn was decorated with candle lanterns, and the golden glow shone upon her corn-colored hair and bathed her creamy shoulders in a magical radiance. And her eyes. . . . Dicky Blades, sitting opposite her, was quite lost in admiration, for her eyes seemed to glow with unearthly light—as if they would shine in darkness, like the eyes of a cat.

Dicky had recovered his self-possession at last, and although he was sorry to learn that Garnet was not feeling well enough to join the party, he was not a little relieved too. Without Garnet's knowing and watchful eye upon him, he felt free to enjoy himself to the full, even perhaps to flirt a little with the ravishing Miss Mayne.

Gerard said very little, and Cassie controlled the conversation with ease and assurance, drawing Dicky out upon the subject of his army career, his future plans, his home in Warwickshire, and of course his fiancée—although it was clear that Dicky was not overeager to discuss Miss Penelope Duff upon this particular occasion.

"Tell me about yourself, Miss Mayne," he urged her. "For I want to learn all I can about you. Since we are both friends of Garnet—er—of Lady Savage, I am certain we must have a great deal in common, and I feel sure we should get to know one another much, much better."

"You flatter me, Captain," purred Cassie. "But no doubt we shall have time to become better acquainted later on, for now I fancy there are other delights in store."

She indicated the figure of old Ebenezer Bramley, who was pulling himself up to his feet with some difficulty—after rather too many tankards of ale—and thumping upon the table with the handle of his walking stick.

"Master Gerard, visitors, ladies and gen'lemen, friends all!" he announced. "Now the first part of the

evening's festivities be over, and we've all ate and drunk our fill. 'Tis time to push back the tables and strike up the band."

"Oh—is there to be dancing?" Dicky asked eagerly. "Miss Mayne, may I have the pleasure—"

She put her finger to her lips, for the old gaffer had not finished his little speech.

"Tonight we start the ball rolling, so to speak, with an age-old custom much enjoyed by one and all. . . . The Button Dance! And I do hereby propose that young Master Gerard should do the honors by leading the set."

"The Button Dance? What's that? I never heard of it," began Dicky.

"It's a local sport," Gerard replied, "and I thought it had died out long ago . . ." He stood up amidst applause and raised a hand for silence. "Mr. Bramley, friends and neighbors, I'm very flattered that you should ask me to lead the dance, but I fear I must refuse. I've done my share at that particular pastime in days gone by, if you remember—"

"Oh, aye—we remember!" came a chorus from the assembled company, and there was a general laugh as a shrill female voice added, "Not likely to forget it, neither!"

Gerard quelled the interruption. "Tonight I must beg to be excused. I'm a married man now, and this is a sport for a bachelor. . . . No doubt you will find someone else to take my place."

"I'm a bachelor!" said Dicky brightly. "I mean, if you're looking for someone to lead the dancing—tell me what to do, and I'll be glad to oblige."

There was another ripple of laughter and a burst of applause. Gerard looked at Dicky and commented dryly, "Very well, Captain. You've volunteered. . . . And I wish you joy of it! And now, with your permission, Miss Mayne, I shall return to the house. . . . I hope you have an amusing evening."

As soon as he had gone, there was a general bustle

of activity. The trestle tables were removed, and the benches pushed back to the walls, clearing a space for dancing. Half a dozen local musicians, with fiddles, flute and trumpet, took their places by the door, and struck up a lively jig.

Captain Richard Blades was ceremoniously escorted to the center of the floor, and the fun began.

"May I choose myself a partner?" he asked, casting a sidelong glance at Cassie Mayne.

They explained to him that in this particular dance he was to pair with no one partner. He was expected to take one turn around with every girl present, for it was a country dance, and each time he made a circuit of the floor, he had to change partners. . . . And every time he changed partners, he had to pay a forfeit.

"A forfeit?" he cried eagerly. "Aha! It's like a nursery game. What do I have to do—give the girl a kiss?"

"No, sir. She gives *you* a kiss—and in exchange you have to give her a button. That's why 'tis called the Button Dance. . . . Now follow the music, and let's begin!"

Dicky had no chance to argue, or even to think over what he had been told; the rhythm of the little band whirled him off in the arms of his first partner, Lucy Ashe.

Pretty, provocative Lucy held him very close and pressed her ample charms against him as they circled the barn, surrounded by a smiling throng. The tempo was brisk, and he felt his body rubbing against hers in a manner that roused him immediately. As they returned to their starting point and the melody changed, Lucy relinquished him to Rosie, but before she let him go she reminded him that he must pay a forfeit—

"A button, if you please!" she exclaimed, and without any more ado pulled one of the buttons from his tailcoat.

"Here—I say!" he protested, half-laughing, but she

had vanished, and he was being whisked away around the floor again.

Rosie was not so forward as Lucy, but she put her face very close to his—her lips only a few inches from his own—and her left hand stroked the small of his back with results that both delighted and dismayed him. His trim white buckskin breeches were beginning to feel uncomfortably tight.

The second circuit being concluded, Rosie demanded—and took—a second button. Dammit, he only had three buttons on his coat and three on his waistcoat—and there were several score girls all waiting to dance him once around the floor. . . . At last, through the mists of beer and cider, Dicky began to get an inkling of what was in store for him.

His third partner completed the rape of his tailcoat; his fourth began on the waistcoat. He was beginning to feel distinctly foolish now, for he knew that everyone in the party was watching him eagerly, and to make matters worse, every girl he danced with contrived to touch him or titillate him in such a way that he could no longer control his mounting excitement.

Numbers five and six undid his waistcoat, and numbers seven and eight made a start upon the tiny pearl buttons that fastened his elegant, frilled shirtfront.

His tails were already flying freely about him and his waistcoat flapped loose as he skipped around the floor. Now he felt a little breeze ruffle the hair upon his chest as moment by moment his shirt fell open and his torso was revealed, shining and sweating in the candlelight.

His next dancing partner was an older woman with a wicked twinkle in her eye.

"Not many more buttons to go now!" She dug him in the ribs saucily as their turn concluded and put her hand upon one of the two gilt buttons that held up the front of his buckskins.

With a sinking heart he heard the thread snap and felt one half of the front panel fall. He tried to hold it

up, but at once his hands were seized by his next partner and he was off on another dizzy tour of the room. All the while his physical condition was becoming more and more apparent, and when his new companion relieved him of the corresponding gilt button, so that the whole front flap of his breeches tumbled down like a falling draw-bridge, he heard a roar of laughter that almost drowned the music.

Perspiring freely, unable to hoist his clothes or cover his confusion, he found himself being clutched tightly against another gyrating pelvis, and cursed his over-eager muscles as they responded involuntarily. He tried to turn his mind to something innocuous—he tried reciting multiplication tables in his head—but it was hopeless.

The last button went the way of all the others—and this was the one that fastened the waistband of his breeches. Now he was being swept away by a very lively girl indeed, and he had nothing whatever to hold up his buckskins. She hopped and skipped with him, twirling like a teetotum, and as he bobbed up and down in her arms he realized to his utter despair that his nether garments were beginning to slip away from him, wriggling down his thighs inch by inch. . . .

The noise was deafening, for by now the entire assembly had given up any pretense of dancing; they were all watching and waiting for his final exposure and keeping up a brisk, rhythmic handclap in time with the band. Faster and faster the music played. With anguish Dicky felt his breeches descending. . . .

Release . . .

Relief came not a moment too soon. As he completed the last nightmare trip around the barn, Dicky heard a voice saying:

"My turn, I think . . ."

He pulled up his clothes as best he could with one hand, and allowed himself to be led away in the arms of Miss Cassandra Mayne—out of the barn, through

the open door, into the blessed shelter of inky blackness beyond.

"Thank you—" he gasped, for he was completely out of breath. "Thank you very much for coming to my rescue—"

In the darkness, Cassie laughed gently. "Your rescue is only half done. I suggest that you should come with me to my room, where I have a sewing basket, and a plentiful supply of buttons. . . . Shall I lead the way, Captain?"

He agreed thankfully. What a delightful young woman she was, to be sure, and how wise, how understanding she must be. He had admired her earlier. Now his relief and gratitude knew no bounds. As he followed her into the house and up a back staircase to her bedchamber, his spirits began to revive. Perhaps, after all, the evening was not going to prove a complete disaster?

She shut the door, then turned to him, smiling.

"Now then," she said, in a voice as soft as silk. "Take off your clothes, Captain Blades. . . . Didn't I tell you we should become better acquainted, later on?"

Chapter Six

FAIRINGS

All the while that she was industriously sewing the buttons back onto his clothes, Cassie kept glancing at Captain Blades, as he sprawled at his ease upon the bed. He did not cut a very military figure now; stripped of coat, waistcoat and breeches, and attired only in his stockings and a pair of drawers, he watched her plying her needle and kept up a flow of flirtatious chatter.

"It's kind of you, Miss Mayne, to go to such trouble on my behalf. . . . I wonder now—what can I possibly do for you by way of recompense?" he mused.

"You are rewarding me with your charming company, Captain. What more could any young woman desire?" she retorted demurely, biting off the thread. "There—that's the last button. . . . Your clothes are all ready for you now."

But the young officer did not seem in any hurry to get dressed. He stretched his sturdy legs and grinned up at her playfully.

"I'm very comfortable as I am, thank you," he said, "with such an obliging hostess to wait upon me. . . . Tell me, Miss Mayne, do you make a practice of coming to the rescue of unhappy gentlemen in difficulties?"

"I am always prepared to do what has to be done," was Cassie's reply.

"Indeed? And you are not shocked when the situation turns out to be as unconventional as this? My

OLD MOON

present state of undress does not scandalize you at all?"

"In truth, Captain, I am not easily scandalized. For I have been employed as governess in many a household where there were growing boys in the family—with their own particular problems . . ."

He stretched out and caught her hand, drawing her closer to him.

"But did they have problems quite as particular as I have—at this moment?" he wanted to know. With his free hand, he encircled her waist, making a sly sortie upon her bosom.

"Why, Captain Blades, for shame!" Cassie said very gently. "Surely you cannot intend me any mischief? Did you not tell me you are engaged to be married to the dearest girl in all Warwickshire?"

"Warwickshire is a long way away," said Dicky, with a wicked gleam in his eye. "You must take pity on a poor bachelor who has been starved of love for many a lonely night . . ."

As he spoke, he pulled her down onto the bed and began to embrace her with enthusiasm.

Faintly, Cassie whispered, "Oh, sir, how can a weak creature like myself resist such a masterful man? I declare, you are a veritable Casanova!"

A brief but hectic passage ensued, and some time later Cassie found herself lying upon her back while Dicky achieved a brisk and breathless satisfaction between her soft white thighs. She shut her eyes and feigned passion. In brutal truth, she was half-regretting her impulse already, for he was very young and very unimaginative. She toyed with the notion of teaching him a few of the thousand refinements he had never yet discovered. He was a good-looking lad, in a slapdash, boyish way, and it might have been diverting to school him a little. . . . But not now; tonight, she had other fish to fry.

Eventually the rhythmic measure ceased, and she

opened her eyes, finding Dicky gazing down at her triumphantly.

"How was that?" he asked with a beaming smile, expecting compliments.

"Energetic, monotonous and disappointing," she replied crisply. "Never mind. I daresay you'll learn to do better, in time. . . . Now take yourself off to your own room, Captain, and mind how you go, for I have to be very careful of my reputation."

His smile faded. He had not been prepared for this businesslike dismissal.

"Oh, I say—look here—" he protested.

"Please don't argue, sir, for I promise you the matter is not worth the tedium of discussion. . . . I am a little surprised, though," she added, as she rolled away from him, making herself comfortable. "I am surprised that you were not instructed in the game of love rather better than that by Lady Savage. I had imagined Garnet would be a very accomplished teacher."

Dicky roared up like a horse that has been suddenly attacked with whip and spur.

"What are you saying?" he demanded. "Garnet? Lady Savage? Are you mad?"

"Oh, come, sir, surely you must have taken advantage of the situation during your long service together in the Peninsular. Two eager young ensigns sharing bed and board. Don't tell me she never dropped her disguise when you were alone together . . . curled up in each other's arms under those romantic Spanish skies?"

"Certainly not!" Dicky was outraged by the suggestion. "Anyway—how did you find out?"

"Never you mind . . ." Cassie smiled back at him over a snowy shoulder. "I am a witch, and I know all kinds of secrets. I know all about Ensign Garnet Mallory and her conquest of the Major-General. . . . And I have half a mind to write the story out in full and send it to a publisher. It should cause quite a sensation, don't you think?"

OLD MOON

"What? You wouldn't dare—" Dicky was almost speechless with indignation.

"Oh, I would dare anything—if I thought it would be worth my while. For I have to work for my living, Captain, and an extra few guineas here or there would mean a great deal to me. . . . Can't you picture it? The shocking revelations of the shameless girl who lived as a boy and was deflowered by her commanding officer—or was it by her messmate, the young ensign from Kenilworth . . . ?"

"I swear to you—all the time we soldiered together, I never guessed, I never laid a finger upon her—"

Cassie threw back her head and laughed.

"I believe you! And I'll write as much in my account of it—the poor ensign who was so completely fooled, he never even knew that his bedmate was a girl. . . . You'll be the laughing stock of the entire British army, Captain Blades!"

There was a long silence, broken at last by Dicky, who said flatly, "What do you want of me, miss? What are you asking?"

"I told you, sir. I am not a rich woman. . . . If you do not wish me to earn money by my pen, you must pay me some compensation, in all fairness."

Another pause; then Dicky asked, "How much?"

"Give me your purse, Captain. . . . I know it's in the right-hand pocket of your tailcoat, for I noticed it there half an hour ago."

She did not even bother to look up as he got dressed. She heard the sound of his breathing, fast and angry, and the clatter as he flung his purse upon the bedside table. A few moments later the door slammed shut, and she was alone. Contentedly, she settled down to sleep.

When she awoke it was morning, and she was aware of the sunshine that streamed through a crack in the curtains. And she was also aware that she was no longer alone.

A man's hand was between her legs, and a man's

hot lips upon the back of her neck. She smelled his raw, earthy sweat and knew him instantly.

"*Jem Bolt. . .*" Her voice cut like the fine edge of a sword. "How dare you invade my bed? How dare you intrude upon my privacy?"

"I had to. I been awake all night, thinking of you . . . you and him," he replied, hoarsely.

She whirled around, raising herself upon one elbow. Jem was lying beside her, his sex erect and throbbing impatiently, his whole body in an agony of frustration.

"I saw you dance him out of the barn, and I followed you both when you did bring him up to your room. . . . I near died of jealousy, miss," he confessed, too deep in misery to try and conceal his humiliation. "I went back to my own bed and tried to sleep—but 'tweren't no good. I had to see you, to be with you again."

"You have a lot to learn, Master Bolt," said Cassie, with bitter contempt. "And your first lesson is that you never—*never*—impose your desires upon me, under any circumstances. . . . Is that clearly understood?"

"Yes, miss." Humbly now, he nodded, but his body was still suffering a frenzy of lust.

Her face softened very slightly as she gazed down at him.

"You poor fool," she said at last. "So you waited all night—until you thought I would be alone?"

"I went to his bedroom first, and I did hear him a-snoring," said Jem. "That's when I knew 'twas all clear, like. . . . And I came to find you."

"You must never do such a thing again. You make a stupid mistake in any case, for I have no attachment whatsoever to Captain Blades. I merely took pity on him after he had been baited so, and I repaired the damage to his clothing—no more than that."

Jem stared at her, his mouth twisting into an incredulous grin.

"Be that the truth? You and him—you never?"

She yawned and stretched her arms sleepily.

"How should you expect me to take interest in such a callow youth? He's nothing to me—whereas *you* . . ."

She hesitated, and he held his breath. Then, with extreme care and delicacy she brushed against his trembling flesh with her fingertips.

"You . . . have certain pleasing possibilities," she said and looked directly into his eyes. "Always provided that you are prepared to obey me implicitly, to follow every command I give you without question, to submit to me in everything . . ."

"Oh, yes, miss—" He was starting to pant now, like a dog in heat. "Yes, oh, yes—"

"Very well . . . but wait!" Suddenly she flicked the back of her hand sharply against the most sensitive area of his body, making him wince and shudder. "Don't be impatient. Before anything else, I want you to answer me a question."

"Anything," he began eagerly.

"The question concerns the child, Blaise Mallory. . . . You are employed by the Mallorys. You must know a great deal about them. Tell me *why* they should choose to adopt Mr. Mallory's nephew—for I understand that is what the boy is, in fact."

"Yes. He's Miss Rosalie's son—Mrs. La Roche, I should say."

"And Mr. La Roche is a high-ranking French diplomat, so they cannot have elected to give away their child for reasons of poverty. I don't understand the mystery, and it vexes me."

"Well, miss, as to that, I did hear among the servants in New York that there had been a great quarrel between Mr. and Mrs. La Roche. . . . He couldn't abide the little lad, wouldn't have nothing to do with him. He left his wife altogether at one point, and they only came together again when she agreed to let Blaise be adopted."

"How very interesting. . . . Do you suppose then that the child is a by-blow, and not the son of Mr. La Roche at all?"

"So the gossip had it in the servant's pantry, miss. . . . But as to who the rightful father might be, I couldn't say. No one knew nothing about that."

"The tale grows more and more intriguing."

Cassie pulled herself up and knelt above Jem, exulting in her splendid nudity and enjoying the effect that the spectacle had upon him.

"So be it. . . . And now we come to *your* situation, Master Bolt. For you have offended against the rules I laid down, and you must therefore be punished. . . . Do you agree?"

"Oh, yes, miss." His lips were wet, and a sheen of perspiration broke out everywhere upon his body. "Punish me, miss . . . please!"

She took a long breath, and nodded.

"With the greatest of pleasure . . ." she said.

Cassie was late for breakfast that morning.

When she slipped into her place at the table, murmuring an apology, Brock eyed her suspiciously. She explained that she had overslept, no doubt because she had passed a very disturbed night and had not managed to settle down to rest until very late.

Dicky Blades, eating a plate of eggs and bacon, felt his ears going pink, and concentrated very hard upon his breakfast.

Brock watched Cassie, but said nothing. Her explanation was unremarkable, but he saw that the pupils of her eyes were dilated, and he sensed an unusual air of elation about her. If she had passed a restless night, he guessed that she had not passed it alone.

Garnet said, "I hope you are feeling sufficiently rested now, Cassie dear, for we were just saying that we should make a family expedition this afternoon, were we not, Gerard?"

Gerard seemed apathetic. "If you say so . . ."

"Oh, we must go to the Fair. It is expected of us. Papa always used to support the village on these occa-

sions," said Garnet. "They will take it amiss if we do not carry on the tradition."

She went on, turning to Cassie, "The autumn fair is held upon the village green at this time every year. We must all go and enjoy ourselves. . . . Brock, make sure you bring plenty of money with you, so that we may sample all the different sideshows. They always have such absurd entertainments set up in the various tents and booths—giants and midgets and bearded ladies—every kind of raree show. . . . And there are so many things to buy, toffee apples and sugar pigs and fairings of all sorts."

"Fairings?" repeated Dicky Blades, looking a little blank.

"Yes, don't they call them so in your part of the world?" Garnet asked. "Fairings are the gifts you buy at the fair—everything from peppermint sticks to a paper nosegay. . . . You must find a keepsake to take home to your fiancée."

"I don't think I will do that," said Dicky, looking down at his plate. "I have no money to throw away on such trifles."

"No money? Oh, that doesn't matter. Brock will pay for everything, won't you, my dear?"

She turned to her husband, but he had moved aside to pour himself another cup of coffee, and did not seem to hear.

"Thank you, but I prefer not to take advantage of Sir Broccard's generosity," said Dicky, looking pinker than ever. "In any case, I have had enough entertainment at the harvest supper to satisfy me for some time. . . . I would rather not go with you to the Fair, if you will excuse me."

"What a shame. Well, the rest of us shall go, I'm determined upon that," continued Garnet. "Coral, I am sure you will enjoy it."

Coral had been very silent throughout the meal. Now she looked up sharply, almost accusingly. "Why? Do you suppose that I should feel at home among the

bearded ladies and the raree shows?" she demanded. "I was an actress, Lady Savage, not a mountebank. There is a difference."

Garnet's smile became strained.

"I think you know I did not mean that. I was suggesting that you might like to take Blaise. I am sure he will have a wonderful time at the Fair."

"I've no doubt of it. He resembles Gerard in that he enjoys every new diversion that offers itself," said Coral. "You may take the boy with you if you wish, Gerard. I shall stay at home. I am not in the mood for such pastimes."

"Oh, but surely—it is a family party," Garnet persisted.

Coral laid down her knife and fork and stood up. A spot of red burned in her cheeks, and her beautiful hair blazed like fire.

"I thought I had made it clear that I feel no part of this family. My only desire is to return to my own people—to Ireland."

"So you said yesterday, but I hoped you had thought better of it," commented Garnet.

"My thoughts are unchanged. The pity of it is that I have not the means to travel such a distance. . . . Oh, for myself, I would risk the discomfort of the journey by any transport that I could find—on the back of a farm cart, if need be. Gerard and I often traveled so when we were younger—and happier. But I cannot subject Blaise to such an ordeal, and I cannot desert him. So you see I am forced to remain here until my dear husband chooses to let me go. . . . I am his prisoner!"

With that, she swept out of the room, and there was an uncomfortable silence.

At last Garnet said quietly, "In that case, you and I shall take Blaise with us, Gerard. Ivory is too young to enjoy the Fair, but I will be happy to take Blaise in her place." She pushed back her chair. "Well—if

everyone has had sufficient to eat, I must go and talk to Mrs. Bolt and make plans for the day."

So it was arranged, and soon after lunch Garnet began to collect what remained of her "family party."

The butler came to tell her that the coach was at the door, all ready to go, and she left Gerard and Blaise on the front steps, while she went in search of Brock. He was not in the drawing room, and she ran upstairs to his study, ready to scold him lovingly for keeping everyone waiting.

The study door was shut, and as she made to turn the handle, she suddenly heard Brock's voice, thick and angry, shouting.

"Will there never be an end to your demands? For God's sake, what kind of monster are you?"

There was a murmured reply that Garnet could not distinguish—in light, feminine tones—and then Brock resumed, "You feed upon us like a parasite, expecting me to pour out money again and again—"

Swiftly, Garnet opened the door and walked in.

Brock had been drinking—she saw that immediately. The brandy decanter was open upon the table, and there was a half-full glass nearby. Brock himself was standing with his hands clenched upon an upright chair, supporting his weight, as he roared out these furious accusations.

And the object of his fury was Cassie Mayne.

Brock stopped speaking as soon as Garnet entered the room, and stared at her, wrinkling his brow. Cassie turned her head, and her eyes widened on seeing Garnet. Then she recovered herself and laughed gaily.

"What must you think of us? You have caught me having a mock argument with your husband. . . . I was trying to persuade him to accompany us to the fair-ground, but he seems quite adamant."

Brock let go of the chair back and shuffled unsteadily forward to the table.

"Too much to do," he mumbled. "Too much work on hand. . . . Better go without me."

Garnet said evenly, "If that is what you wish. . . . Cassie, the coach is waiting below. Do you go on; I will follow in a moment."

When they were alone, she moved to Brock, and took him in her arms.

"Brock, my darling, why have you begun drinking again? What is upsetting you? Is it the wound in your head?"

"No . . . I'm all right, perfectly—perfectly all right," he grunted and swung the chair around clumsily, slumping into it sideways. "Be off with you to the Fair—don't concern yourself with me."

"Of course I'm concerned. Would you rather I did not go? Gerard and Cassie can take the boy. I'll stay here if you like—"

"Go!" he roared, suddenly striking the table with his fist. "I tell you I'm all right. Just go—and leave me in peace!"

There was nothing more to be said. Defeated, Garnet left the study without a word or a backward glance. Brock picked up the brandy glass and gazed into it as if he hoped to find some answer there.

The village green was a bustle of activity; the autumn sun shone down brilliantly on striped tents and awnings, painted placards, and a small forest of flagpoles, each supporting a fluttering pennant or a string of bunting.

On every side, hucksters cried their wares. A peddler besought them to buy from his stall of pinchbeck jewelry. A baker extolled the virtue of his fruit pies and saffron buns. An old woman cackled as she wheedled the passers-by, urging them to sample her home-made jams and jellies. Lace-makers, confectioners, alewives and cheapjacks of every kind kept up a continual babble of noise, until Garnet was almost deafened.

As they strolled from one booth to the next, she took

advantage of the hubbub to draw Cassie a little to one side.

"My dear, I feel so sorry—and ashamed—that Brock should have insulted you in that way. I would not have had it happen for the world. He didn't know what he was saying, of course."

"Think nothing of it—I don't." Cassie dismissed the incident lightly, then added, "By the by, did he happen to tell you *why* he was abusing me so? Did he give you any reason for it?"

"None at all. I cannot understand it. I've told him time and again that you are the dearest and best of women, but for some inexplicable reason he seems to bear you a grudge. . . . I shall not rest until I have found a way to rid him of his silly prejudice. It's so *unfair* . . ."

"I do not love thee, Doctor Fell—the reason why, I cannot tell," quoted Cassie, ironically. "Well, there's nothing to prevent his disliking me if he wishes to. I shan't hold it against the man, I assure you."

"But all that nonsense he was talking about money. He seems to resent having to pay your wages. . . . I was afraid he would actually try to dismiss you from the household. He's threatened to, more than once."

"Oh, no . . ." Cassie smiled faintly. "I don't believe he will ever do that. Deep down I'm sure he doesn't want me to leave Rosewood . . . not really."

"What? But only the other day, he said—"

"Whatever he may say, I promise you he will never send me packing—believe me! And as for his grumbles about my wages, it's just some confused idea he has got into his head that I have been pestering him for more money . . . which is quite absurd, of course. I have money enough already. . . . Look—you shall see how rich I am! I shall buy some fairings for us all!"

And Cassie suddenly pulled out a purse of red morocco leather, shaking it gaily and letting Garnet hear the coins chinking within it.

"Blaise, you would like a sugar pig, I'm sure . . . and

Mr. Mallory, what can I find for you? A rosette of blue ribbon to wear in your buttonhole? Blue to match your eyes?"

She would not take no for an answer, but insisted upon buying them each some gaudy trinket, a necklace of carved wooden beads for Garnet, and a gilded gingerbread man to take back for Ivory, so she should not feel neglected.

As Gerard fastened the rosette to his lapel, Garnet said, "I don't see the old silhouette cutter, do you? He was here every year when we were children . . ."

"He was ancient, even then. No doubt he's been gathered to his eternal reward by now," said Gerard.

"Perhaps." Garnet shivered, despite the warmth of the sunshine. "Nothing lasts forever, does it? Everything changes . . ."

They made their way among the sideshows, and Blaise laughed to see the boys ducking for apples and applauded the two teams of strongmen who were engaged in a tug-of-war across the village pond, with a wetting in store for the losers.

"There's one thing that hasn't changed!" Gerard exclaimed, pointing.

At the end of the green, a painted scaffolding stood outlined against the sky, and within its framework, swingboats of red, blue and green swooped and soared in midair.

"Remember the swingboats, Garnet? How we doted upon them." He smiled. "Shall you and I take a turn now, for old time's sake?"

"Not I," said Garnet. "They always made me feel dizzy . . . and you mustn't take Blaise upon the swings either, for he's eaten so many sweetmeats, I am quite sure the ride would have an unsettling effect!"

"Spoilsport," Gerard began to tease his sister, but Cassie interposed, "If you wish for a partner, I'll be glad to accompany you, Mr. Mallory. . . . I haven't been up in a swingboat for years, and I should enjoy it above all things."

Gerard glanced at her, then laughed.

"So be it, Miss Mayne. Let us take our chance together!"

Garnet said she would look after Blaise. They wandered off to explore the further delights of the fair-ground, and were soon swallowed up in the crowds.

Gerard assisted Cassie to climb up a rickety step-ladder, and then followed her into the narrow gondola, while the showman in charge of the ride gave them a hefty shove to start them off.

Once they were in motion, the speed of the swing was controlled by long ropes that hung down from above, each one ending in a soft woollen fleece looking rather like a furry caterpillar. Gerard slipped off his jacket—for it was warm work to keep the boat in motion—and set to vigorously, hauling upon the ropes in turn and sending them rocking to and fro, higher and higher.

The gondola itself was almost too small to accommodate them with any comfort. They sat facing each other on low wooden seats with their legs outstretched, and as the swing climbed in widening arcs, they found themselves lying back at full length, their thighs touching.

"It's wonderful. What a thrilling sensation!" breathed Cassie. "I feel as if I were flying . . ."

The rest of the world seemed to drop away beneath them, then swirl crazily up again, and hang for a second almost upside-down above their heads. Higher and higher the swingboat soared, in a giddy pendulum beat, to and fro—and their pulses leaped to match the rhythm.

"Forgive me—for pressing against you so closely—" Gerard said, breathlessly. "I had forgotten these contraptions were so narrow . . ."

"Please don't apologize," said Cassie. "It's all part of the fun, the fun of the fair . . ."

As she spoke, she shifted slightly, deliberately eas-

ing her leg on top of Gerard's. He looked into her eyes, and she smiled back at him.

"It's exciting, don't you think?" she asked. "Don't you feel the excitement too, Mr. Mallory?"

He did not reply, but pulled on the ropes with such force that the swingboat seemed in danger of going clear over the crossbar and completing a full circle.

"I'm exhilarated—but I'm frightened too," Cassie gasped. "If we should fall out now, we would be killed instantly. . . . Do you mind if I cling to you—?"

Without waiting for a reply, she put her hands upon his knees and gripped him tightly, then at each upward swing she let her fingers slide still farther along his legs—and at each sickening plunge downward, she gave a little cry and dug her fingertips still more deeply into his muscular thighs.

As she let her hands travel onward and upward, brazenly exploring his physique, she whispered, "Hold me too, Gerard. Hold me tight and don't let me go—*hold me!*"

But he did not respond to her entreaty. Instead he let go of the ropes that propelled the swingboat. Gradually the little craft slowed down, moving in ever more gentle arcs and eventually coming to rest.

"I think you forget that I am a married man," he said, with chilling politeness. "Perhaps we should forgo the rest of the ride."

She looked at him with naked anger, and countered his rejection by saying bitterly, "An unhappily married man, I believe?"

Gerard brushed himself down, preparatory to alighting from the swing, and shrugged into his jacket.

"That is something I prefer not to discuss," he said.

"No doubt! Another family secret, to be hidden away with the rest of the skeletons in the cupboard—like the parentage of Blaise La Roche?"

It was a shot in the dark, but she knew at once that it had found its target. Gerard gave her a single glance that mingled hatred and dismay, then fumbled

at the rosette in his buttonhole and tossed the blue ribbons into her lap.

"Take it. . . . I want nothing more to do with you, Miss Mayne."

"Oh, what a pity, when it matches the color of your eyes—and *his*. . . . Does your wife know that you fathered her sister's child?"

Gerard remained frozen, about to scramble to his feet.

"What are you saying?" he asked, deep in his throat. "*Who told you?*"

"Nobody. . . . I saw the resemblance and made a guess at it . . . and now you have confirmed that my guess was correct." She began to laugh. "How long will it be before your wife makes the same guess? Perhaps it would be kinder if I were to tell her now. . . . What's it worth to you, Mr. Mallory?"

"I hope you rot in hell!"

The words were torn from Gerard as he scrambled out of the swingboat, leaving it rocking wildly. He jumped down and ran off into the crowd, as if the devil himself were at his heels.

Cassie tucked the blue rosette into her bosom and laughed again, waiting for the gondola to be still. She could not remember when she had spent such an enjoyable afternoon.

Chapter Seven

SUMMER'S END

From a distance, Garnet had seen Gerard's precipitate flight, and now she made her way to the swing-boats as the showman assisted Cassie down to earth once more.

"What happened? Why did Gerard run off like that?" Garnet asked.

"Where's Papa?" Blaise chimed in.

Cassie looked at the boy and smiled.

"I think the motion of the swings did not agree with him. He was feeling a little unwell. I'm afraid he decided to go home."

Garnet said, "I'm sorry. It's a disappointing ending to our expedition. Perhaps we had better return to the coach and follow his example."

Blaise protested, but Garnet said, "Don't forget, we left poor Ivory all by herself. She has no one to play with. She must be wondering where you are. Let's go back and find her."

So the little party made their way home to Rosewood. Garnet noted that the blue knot of ribbons that had been bought to decorate Gerard's lapel had now found its way to Cassie's bosom, but she did not comment upon it. Perhaps later, when Blaise was not present, she would ask Cassie what had taken place.

When they alighted at the front steps of Rosewood Hall, Cassie looked up at the sunny sky and sighed. "It's much too fine to go indoors yet. Shall we take a stroll through the grounds?"

"You may if you wish," replied Garnet. "Blaise and

I have to go to Ivory. We must give her the gingerbread man you bought for her."

"Very well," said Cassie. "I will go and dispose of my bonnet and my gloves, and then take a turn through the gardens. . . . I shall see you later."

She was not the only one to find the house uncomfortable on this hot afternoon. Through the flowering arbors, where the last roses of summer shone like jewels amidst the leaves, Cassie spied a solitary figure, walking the green-turfed pathways.

"Mrs. Mallory—Coral! What a pleasant surprise."

Coral started and looked up, as if poised for flight. She had no desire for company, and preferred to be alone with her unhappy thoughts. But when she saw that the newcomer was Cassie, she relaxed a little.

"Good afternoon, Miss Mayne. I did not expect to see you here."

"Please call me Cassie. Had you forgotten that we are friends?"

Coral shook her head and replied quietly: "God knows I have need of friends at this time."

"So I believe. . . . That is why I am very pleased to find you here by yourself. We may talk without interruption." Cassie slipped her arm through Coral's and led her through the gate in the hedge to the orchard beyond.

"But how do you come to return so early from the Fair?" Coral inquired. "I was not expecting you back until teatime."

"Oh, we changed our minds. . . . Your husband decided he had had enough of the Fair, and set off on his own. So we had to pack up and do likewise."

Coral's lovely face was set as she remarked, "How like him. . . . Because he chose to leave, everyone else had to do the same . . ."

She stopped, looking up into the branches of an apple tree, where the ripe red fruit hung temptingly overhead. She stretched up on tiptoe, but it was no good. They were just out of reach.

Cassie squeezed her arm sympathetically. "I understand how you must feel. I know you want to leave Rosewood and go home to your own country. It must be very painful for you to have to stay here against your will."

"Painful, yes . . . and humiliating. I don't fit in here. I never will, if I live to be a hundred! Why won't Gerard realize that, and take me away?"

Her hands were trembling, and her palms felt damp. She pulled out a handkerchief and rolled it into a ball between her fingers, adding, "Perhaps he does realize it . . . but the truth is, he no longer cares . . ."

"I think it's disgraceful the way you are treated," said Cassie fervently. "And I'd never have believed Garnet could be so unfeeling—so ungracious. I hoped very much that you would be friends, but it seems that is impossible."

"How could she think of me as a friend—when she despises me as a cheap, worthless creature with no morals and no breeding!"

Coral dabbed the handkerchief across her temples and her upper lip, and continued, "Excuse me. It really is so very warm today. Even the weather's unseasonable—nothing in this hateful place feels natural to me!"

"I have an idea," said Cassie suddenly. "Since the day is so oppressive, let us go down to the fishpond. Garnet has often told me she used to bathe there as a child. . . . It's quite safe."

Coral stared at her. "Bathing? In the pond? Oh, but—"

"Why not? You can swim, can't you? It will be heavenly. Oh, come along!"

"Yes, but . . . suppose someone should see us?"

"There's nobody about. The servants are busy indoors, and the farmhands are all off at the Fair. We shall not be disturbed. Let's go—quickly—we can

OLD MOON

cut through this way, and down by the water meadow . . .”

Cassie wouldn't hear of any argument, and Coral allowed herself to be persuaded. Indeed, the thought of a leisurely, cool swim seemed undeniably attractive. When they reached the little pond fringed by an alder tree and a line of willows, Cassie began to pull off her clothes eagerly.

She unlaced her bodice, and Coral watched as her breasts were suddenly released from imprisonment. She noticed that the nipples were surprisingly dark, almost brown in color against her creamy skin. . . . And she saw a mark beneath her right breast.

“What are you looking at? This hideous blemish?” Cassie tossed her head and pulled her dress down further, almost proudly. “I used to be ashamed of it, but it doesn't bother me now. . . . We all have some little peculiarity, I daresay. I'm not ashamed, are you?”

Coral had made no attempt to undress, but stood where she was, unmoving.

“Come, you must not be shy with me. We're friends, are we not? And friends have no secrets from one another. . . . Let me see what charms you have to display . . .”

Cassie moved closer; with her dress rolled down to the waist, and her bosom defiantly exposed. Coral noticed with surprise that her nipples were no longer soft, but firm—firm and erect, in a state of physical tension.

Now Cassie was smiling, and she stretched out her hands to unfasten the bosom of Coral's gown.

“Let me help you, my dear,” she said.

As soon as she felt Cassie's touch upon her skin, Coral shivered—and backed away.

“No . . . I've changed my mind. I don't think I want to bathe, after all. I'm sorry.”

“Oh, don't be such a goose. It will be the greatest fun—”

"No, really—I'd rather not! Forgive me . . . I must go . . ."

Coral turned and walked away, stepping quickly through the long grasses that brushed at her skirt. Behind her she heard Cassie's laughter, ringing in her ears.

When Garnet had seen to her daughter, she left her in the care of one of the maids, together with Blaise, who was determined to explain to his little cousin just what he had seen at the fairground. As she made her way to Brock's study, she dreaded what she might find there. If he had continued to drink ever since she left the house, he would be in a sorry state by this time.

And so he was, but she noted with some relief that the decanter of brandy was almost untouched. It was not alcohol now that thickened his speech and reddened his eyes.

When she entered, Brock was on his knees beside a large mahogany box, a military chest that stood open, with the lid thrown back, and the drawers pulled out onto the floor. He looked up at her, surrounded by the relics of his army career—a scarlet tunic, a pair of gold epaulettes, a silken sash, and a slender sword half out of its scabbard . . .

He looked up and narrowed his eyes, as if he had difficulty in recognizing her.

"Brock, what are you doing? You're not going to put on your uniform?"

"No . . . not that . . . never that. . . . I shall never wear my uniform again," he said, in a strange, unfamiliar voice. "No, I was simply . . . looking through some old memories. This sword needs cleaning, there's a spot of rust upon the blade."

She moved toward him, but he turned away from her. She saw the vein throbbing in his temple, and the scar that ran up into his graying hair looked raw and ugly.

"Is the Fair over so soon?" he asked, making an effort at conversation.

"No . . . we left early. I want to talk to you, Brock."

"Oh? What's wrong?" He peered into her face, frowning.

"I must ask you about Cassie."

He seemed to catch his breath, then moistened his lips, saying, "What about her?"

"There are things I don't understand—and I believe it's important that I *should* understand. . . . You dislike her so much, for no reason that I know of. I've never found you to be unfair or unjust in your judgment of anyone until now—and I must know the cause of it."

Brock took a deep breath, and struggled to his feet with difficulty. She tried to help, but he would not let her approach him.

"I detest Cassandra Mayne with all my heart," he said at last. "She is an evil woman. . . . Will that satisfy you?"

"No! I know her better than you—better than anyone—and you're completely wrong. How can you speak of her so—what is there evil in her character?"

Brock stood with his legs braced, swaying slightly, as he replied, "She has some devilry in her. . . . She wants to destroy—destroy and despoil the happiness of others—"

"It's not true. What has she ever done to you? Can you tell me one thing she has ever said that bears out such an accusation?"

He was silent.

"You see! You can't answer me. She's totally innocent—"

"She is grasping and avaricious. She makes continual demands upon me for money—"

"You mean she asks for her wages! That's not unreasonable, surely!"

"Not only her wages. More money, over and above that—much more." He spoke in disconnected, broken

phrases, aware that he was on dangerous ground now.

Suddenly Garnet remembered something that had puzzled her, earlier.

"A red morocco purse. . . . full of gold pieces. . . . Did you give her that?" she asked. "Was that yours?"

"A red purse? No, I know nothing of any purse. But she badgers me for money all the time. She will not rest until she has drained me dry—"

He turned his back on Garnet, so she should not see the misery in his face.

Her shoulders drooped; she knew she would get nothing more from him while he was in this mood.

"Very well, Brock. Then I must not badger you for explanations either . . . not now."

With a rustle of silk, he heard her leave the study, and the door clicked shut behind her.

Now—now at last he could resume his search. He fell upon the open chest again, turning over the contents of one drawer after another, and then at last he gave a grunt of satisfaction. He pulled out his old army pistol, and broke it open. It was still in perfect working order, and he had the ammunition to charge it. One bullet would be sufficient . . .

He had found what he was looking for.

Garnet hurried along the corridor and around the corner into the West Wing, making her way to her old room, the bedchamber she had slept in every night of her childhood. The room that was now occupied by Cassie herself.

She had made up her mind; if she could not get at the truth from Brock, she would ask Cassie for an explanation. She must balance Cassie's statement that Brock did not really wish her to leave Rosewood, against his implacable antagonism. Garnet knocked at the door once, and went in.

But the room was empty.

She remembered, too late, that Cassie had gone for a walk in the gardens. Very well, she would wait

here for her return. She was determined to get to the heart of this mystery, once and for all.

She walked across to the window, looking out, but there was no sign of Cassie upon the green lawns below.

Then her eye fell on the little walnut dressing table that stood under the window, her own old dressing-table. Cassie's bonnet and gloves lay on top, where she had discarded them, and one of the drawers was slightly open. Garnet glanced down and saw the gleam of red leather within.

She felt quite certain that she had never seen Cassie with that purse before this afternoon. Where could it have come from? Without stopping to think, she pulled the drawer out and examined it curiously. It looked like a man's purse, and as she turned it over she noticed that there were two initials worked into one of the corners—R.B.

But even as she observed this, she disregarded it—for as she picked it up she uncovered another purse lying underneath. No, not a purse—a beaded reticule, embroidered with silver . . . The one that Garnet had lost on the night of the ball in Brussels . . . the very night she first met Cassie.

Garnet stood and looked at that little trinket for a very long time, thinking over all that she could remember about Cassie Mayne.

Slowly, she replaced the drawer and its contents as she had found them, and went off in search of Cassie. She had to talk to her, as soon as possible . . .

In a guest room on another floor, within the east wing, Dicky Blades bit his fingernails and paced backward and forward across the turkey carpet. He had to see Miss Mayne, and talk to her . . . had to throw himself upon her mercy. That was his only hope.

But even as he thought this, he knew he was deceiving himself. What hope had he of playing upon her sympathies? What mercy would she show him—

she, who had stripped him of self-respect as she stripped him of his clothes? He knew well enough what sort of woman she was; and he knew that he could go down upon his knees and beg her without making the faintest impression upon that heart of stone.

But something must be done. That was certain.

All the money he could save had been in that morocco purse. Oh, there had not been a fortune tucked away in there—for he had spent a good deal on buying presents for his family, his parents, an engagement ring for Penelope—but such money as he had left would be required to pay his fare upon the stage-coaches taking him north on his long journey home to Warwickshire.

Without those golden guineas, he was trapped in this house, with no means of escape.

He could not explain to Garnet how stupid he had been or ask her for assistance. And somehow he could not imagine himself telling the whole sorry tale to Sir Broccard either.

There was only one other possibility. . . . He recoiled from the unpleasant necessity, but he really had no choice.

It's the only way out. . . . And needs must, when the devil drives, he thought to himself.

He left the guest room and ran downstairs, deciding that if it had to be done, the sooner he got it over, the better.

As he descended the staircase, he passed Coral on her way up. He sketched a hasty bow and muttered a conventional greeting. She acknowledged it, without pausing. Both were preoccupied with their own problems.

When Coral returned to her room, she was surprised to find Gerard already there. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, with his hands clasped between

his knees and his head bent. Instinctively, she knew that something was wrong.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Is it Blaise?"

He looked up, caught off guard. "What do you mean?"

"Is he all right? I left him with Ivory and that little maid—what is her name—Rosie."

"And he's with them still. I saw them only a few moments ago, as I came into the house. Don't worry."

"Oh . . . I get so nervous after what happened at the harvest." She looked at Gerard again, and persisted, "But something *is* wrong, isn't it? I can tell."

He nodded. "Yes. . . . And it's something that has been wrong for a very long time—something I have never had the courage to tell you."

She was about to question him further, but something in his face silenced her. Instead, she sank to the floor by the bed, kneeling at his feet and searching his face for an explanation.

"I've tried to run away from the truth for too long, but it must be faced at last," he continued. "Something happened this afternoon, something so vile that it forces me to be honest with you . . ."

She watched him, waiting in dread for what was to come.

"That woman—Cassandra Mayne—has contrived to uncover my secret—a secret I have kept from you all this while—and she has threatened to tell you, unless I buy her silence."

Coral held her breath and heard the beating of her own heart.

"That is something I cannot—will not do. And there is only one course open to me. I have to break a promise I gave to your sister before we left America, and tell you everything."

"A promise—to Rosalie?" She spoke in a whisper.

He nodded, unable to look at her, then after a moment he began to speak.

"You remember when we were on tour in Ireland

with your uncle—four years, nearly four and a half years ago? We were at Cappelquin in the springtime, and you would have nothing to do with me.”

“Of course I remember. Go on.”

“I was in despair. I loved you. I wanted you—and it seemed I had no hope of winning you. . . . Then there was an afternoon when I asked you and Rosalie to go out on the river with me, in a little rowing boat. . . . You refused, so Rosalie and I went alone.”

He remembered it so vividly that he felt Coral must be reading his thoughts. She must be able to see it too—the boat moored up by the bank, rising and falling gently as the water lapped under the keel, the warmth of the fresh April day, and the warmth of Rosalie’s generous body as they lay together side by side, and she gave herself to him . . .

“You need someone, my dear,” she had said. “And so do I . . .”

He recalled how their embraces had become more and more impassioned, and how they had gradually slipped into a loving intimacy that aroused all his masculine desires. And she had understood and helped him, easing him into that age-old mystery that seemed to blot out every care from his mind and fill his heart and his spirit with joy. They came together in a mingling of mutual need and affection, and satisfaction. Their bodies interlocked, and their hunger was assuaged for a while, as the little boat bucked and plunged beneath them.

“. . . And that’s how it was,” Gerard concluded at last. “And that’s the only time Rosalie and I ever loved one another. For love it was—of a kind.”

Coral could not speak, but shook her head blindly, unwilling even now to accept the inevitable. Finally she forced out the words, “And—Blaise . . . ?”

Still he could not look at her. “Everything Rosalie told us was the truth, except for the identity of the boy’s father. Even *I* did not know, then. . . . I accepted what she said. I really believed it had been

some unknown sailor, who was later lost at sea. It was not until we'd decided to adopt Blaise that she confessed to me. And then she made me promise I would never tell you."

After a silence, Coral asked very quietly: "Do you still love her?"

"I have never loved her—as I loved you, as I love you still."

With those words, he found the courage to face her. They looked into each other's eyes, and he saw that she was crying.

"I would have given ten years of my life not to have hurt you," he said.

But then he realized that through her tears she was smiling, and she put out her hands and held him tightly.

"Dearest Gerard, I love you too. . . . And now Blaise really is *our* son. That is all that matters."

He felt relief sweep over him like a great wave breaking upon a shore, and suddenly they were in each other's arms. He found her mouth and kissed her—kissed her in a way that they had almost forgotten. It had been a long while since they last knew love without pretense, without deceit.

When they could speak again, Coral asked huskily, "Tell me one thing. Does Paul know—about you?"

"No. . . . Nobody else knows. Only the three of us," he assured her.

"And Cassie Mayne. You are forgetting her."

"Oh, God! You're right, of course. Somehow she guessed—and I was not quick enough to conceal the truth from her. She's too clever for me."

They stared at one another, and found in each other's expression a sort of desperation . . . a determination.

"What are we to do about her?" Coral asked, slowly.

"We must think of a plan. Where is she now, I wonder?"

"I can tell you that—for I left her not half an hour ago," said Coral. "She's down in the meadows, at the old fishpond."

Some time later Brock Savage walked alone down the long slope of the water meadow, toward the little pond screened by willows. The sweat ran from his brow, and he brushed it out of his eyes with the back of his left hand. The weather was unbearably hot. Summer was going out in a last blaze of glory. But it was not only the temperature that oppressed him.

His head felt as if it were splitting; the repeated spasms of pain that smashed his skull were almost unbearable. He had tried to alleviate the torture with brandy, but that did no good. It only fuddled his wits, and if ever he needed his wits about him, it was here and now.

He had to make one final attack upon the enemy.

In wartime, he had never swerved from the course of duty, but in wartime a soldier's duty was clear—to attack, to conquer, and to kill, if necessary.

Now, when they were supposed to be at peace, he had to face another, more insidious enemy. An enemy to his security, to Garnet's happiness. To love and life, and all that he held dear. And if he had to kill again to defeat this new enemy, he would not flinch from that either.

Intent upon his purpose, Brock tried to ignore the hammer blows that battered him unceasingly, as he walked on through the green fields. He was closer now, only another twenty yards to go. Every step was a torment that must be endured. Still he strode forward, his whole frame saturated with sweat. Again he tried to clear his eyes, wiping them with the back of his left hand.

Only the left hand, because in his right he carried the loaded pistol.

He reached the willow brake and stopped, trying to steady his nerves. A thousand lightning flashes

OLD MOON

danced crazily before him, and he knitted his brows, striving to focus his vision and see clearly.

There she was . . .

Cassie lay upon her back beside the smooth waters of the pond, her clothes in a little heap under a bush. She had been swimming, for her hair was wet and water drops still clung to her body, making her pale skin shine and glitter as if it had been decked with a thousand diamonds. Now she dozed in the sun, her limbs outstretched, drying herself after her swim.

Even at this moment, hating her as he did with every passion of his mind and soul, Brock could not help realizing how enticing she was—beautiful, sinuous, and cruel . . . the beauty of a wild animal, utterly without mercy. Her long, slender legs were slightly parted, and he could just see the faint shimmer of her body hair. Her breasts were pointed up at the sun, as she lay exposed to its rays like a primitive savage, giving herself up to mindless worship, and under her right nipple there was the trefoil stain of crimson, like a splash of blood . . .

Slowly, Brock raised the pistol, looked along the sights, took careful aim and pulled the trigger.

Just a few moments earlier, Gerard walked into the stableyard with Dicky Blades, both men talking at once.

"I'm sorry. I'd like to help you, but it's out of the question," Gerard was saying.

"I beg you to think again, sir. I would not ask you if there were any other alternative—" Dicky broke in.

"I tell you I cannot do it. I'm in difficulties enough as it is, Captain!"

"Difficulties? You? Forgive me, sir, but I find that hard to believe. . . . Look here, I'm appealing to you as an old messmate. We never served together, but I know you were in the Dragoons. Surely you won't refuse a comrade-in-arms?"

ROSEWOOD

Gerard opened his mouth to reply, but his words were cut short by the sound of a pistol shot.

It rang out sharp and clear, and immediately a whole colony of rooks in the elm trees beyond the house flew up with an indignant flapping of wings, uttering a deafening chorus of dismay.

"What was that, in heaven's name?" Gerard exclaimed.

The answer was not long in coming. Almost as soon as the echoes of the shot had died away, while the angry rooks were still cawing and protesting, they heard the sound of running footsteps upon the cobblestones.

A moment later, Jem Bolt burst into the stable-yard, his face ashen, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"For God's sake, man, what's happened?" demanded Gerard.

Almost speechless with grief and shock, Jem tried to pull himself together but could not. Between sobs, he gasped out the news:

"It—it's Miss Cassie. . . . She's *dead!*"

Part Four



New Moon

Chapter One

WANTED FOR MURDER

Coral was half-undressed when she heard the shot ring out. She stopped what she was doing, and listened.

There was no further sound, but she stood still a moment longer, about to step into her evening gown. She told herself the shot meant nothing; someone taking aim at another rabbit for the pot, in all probability. . . . And yet—a cold fear touched her heart, and she remained frozen with misgiving.

She had been turning over in her mind all that Gerard had told her. It was a relief to know the truth at last, however unhappy that truth might be, but afterward, when Gerard had insisted on going to find Cassie for one final confrontation, Coral could not help feeling uneasy and apprehensive. And now—that single, enigmatic pistol shot. . . .

Suddenly she had to find Gerard, to reassure herself that all was well. She threw aside the costume she held in her hands and pulled on her robe-de-chambre instead, unwilling to waste another minute. Rushing from her bedroom, she hurried along the corridor.

If any of the servants had seen her at this moment, they would have been amazed at the spectacle—Mrs. Gerard Mallory, barefoot, and clad only in a half-petticoat, pulling the ruffled negligee around her and trying to slip her arms into its sleeves as she raced for the stairs. She did not know quite what prompted her

to run—only that for some strange reason she was desperately afraid.

Garnet was walking across the tiled entrance hall as Coral ran down the main staircase. She glanced up, and reacted at the sight of her lovely sister-in-law, copper curls flying, one perfect breast exposed as she struggled to fasten her robe.

"I heard a gun go off," Coral began breathlessly.

"Yes. So did I. . . . Come with me. . . ."

Garnet led the way along a maze of narrow passages, through the servants' quarters, and out the side entrance of the house, opening on to the stableyard.

"Pray God no one has been hurt," Coral said.

There was no one in the yard, but they looked at one another uncertainly. Coral realized she must present a bizarre appearance, and knotted the robe still more tightly around her waist.

"I was in the middle of dressing for dinner," she added, by way of explanation. "Gerard has gone out to—to—" She broke off, the words choking her.

Through the archway that led off toward the home farm, a little party of men now made their way, their boots loud upon the cobbles—a party of stretcher bearers. Gerard and Dicky headed the group, assisted by several of the stable boys, and Jem Bolt, his face almost unrecognizable with grief, followed behind.

Between them they carried a wooden hurdle, and upon this lay the naked body of a beautiful young woman with corn-colored hair. Her figure was exquisite, flawed only in one particular—the ugly bullet hole below her breast, where the trefoil-birthmark had flowered into a gaping wound.

"Holy Mother," gasped Garnet, crossing herself quickly.

At the same instant, Garnet uttered a single exclamation, a short, sharp expression of sorrow and loss.

"*Cassie!*" The name was wrung from her like a kind of farewell.

"What happened?" asked Coral "Is she—?"

NEW MOON

Gerard nodded, tight-lipped. "No doubt about it. . . . One bullet put paid to her," he said grimly. "But we've sent for the doctor, of course. You men, carry her in to the coach house and wait until the doctor gets here."

The stretcher bearers moved on, through a doorway and out of sight.

"But *how?*" Coral looked into Gerard's eyes, searching for an answer. "Who can have done such a thing?"

"Heaven knows," Gerard replied. "It seems she had been swimming in the fishpond, and was drying herself in the sun, when . . . someone found her there . . ."

"I must go and look for Brock," said Garnet. "I must tell him."

"I'm sorry you should have been faced with it like this," Gerard turned to his sister. "I meant to prepare you for the shock. I know she was a friend of yours . . ."

"She was . . . yes," said Garnet, and squared her shoulders. "And now she has gone. . . . Excuse me, please." With great self-control, she walked back into the house.

Coral shivered a little, watching her go. "She's very calm and collected, I must say. Cool as a cucumber."

"Don't forget Garnet has served on the battlefield. She is accustomed to sudden death," Gerard said. Then he took in his wife's *deshabille* for the first time and remarked: "Why—you're half-dressed. . . . What have you been doing?"

"I was upstairs—changing for dinner," Coral shivered again.

"Then you'd better go indoors as well. Now the sun has gone down it's not so warm. You mustn't catch cold."

Dicky Blades reappeared from the coach house and wandered across to join them.

"This is a rum go," he began unhappily. "It gave

me quite a turn to see her lying there like that. . . . And that fellow, what's his name, that servant of yours?"

"Jem Bolt," said Gerard.

"Yes, Jem. . . . He seems to have gone completely to pieces. I never saw a chap so broken up. I suppose he must have been fond of her."

"Some people were, I believe," said Gerard, non-committally.

Coral cut in quickly, changing the subject, "Your hair's wet, Captain Blades. . . . The water is dripping on to your collar. It will spoil the velvet."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am—I hadn't noticed." Dicky pulled out a handkerchief and did his best to rub himself dry. "The fact is, I was feeling hot and sticky earlier on. Couldn't think straight, somehow—so I put my head under the pump to clear my brains!"

As an afterthought, he added gloomily: "Not that it seems to have done much good . . ."

"I think perhaps we should all go back into the house and wait," said Gerard.

"Wait?" Dicky frowned. "What for?"

"The doctor—or the coroner. And no doubt they'll send the constable to question us as well," replied Gerard. "After all—this is a case of murder."

Garnet found Brock in the bedroom; and he too was in the process of changing his clothes. At the sound of the door he turned to her, stripped to the waist, his broad chest gleaming in the dying light that filtered through the open casement.

"Oh . . . it's you," he said, with an effort.

"Brock, I must tell you. . . . Something has happened—"

"I know," he said. "You have come to tell me that Cassandra Mayne is dead."

"You *know*?"

"Of course. And that is why I am getting dressed. I thought I had better put on some more formal attire

before I present myself to the authorities. . . . I intend to hand myself over to justice," he explained.

She shook her head, incredulously, as she took in what he was saying.

"You?"

Her eyes followed his gaze. On the bedside table lay Brock's pistol. Garnet put her hand to her head, fighting to remain in command of herself. "Dear God . . . I was so afraid. I wouldn't let myself think about it, but now . . ."

She turned and shut the door carefully, then faced him again. "What are we going to do?"

"I have already told you. I shall give myself up. . . . It will be very simple. I intend to make my confession," he replied.

"Oh, no . . . no, Brock. You must not!"

"It is the only course open to me. I do not expect any special consideration. I suppose it was what doctors call a brainstorm—I don't know—I only know that I had to kill her. And she was your friend. . . . I can't expect you to understand or to forgive what I have done . . ."

"She was my friend, but I think perhaps you knew her more accurately than I," Garnet said slowly. "For I begin to realize how little I understood her, after all. I only discovered, this afternoon, that she was also a liar—and a thief."

"You know *that*?"

Brock had been about to pull on a clean shirt, but now he paused, staring at his wife.

"I found a bag she had stolen from me—oh, long ago—a thing of no value at all, but she must have taken a fancy to it. And there was a man's purse with it, full of gold coins. . . . She was a magpie; she couldn't help taking things that caught her fancy."

"She was more dangerous than that," Brock said, choosing his words with care. "For one of the things she tried to take from you—was my love . . ."

Garnet stared at him, her eyes wide.

"It's a sordid story, and I'm not proud of my share in it . . . but very recently—when I was having some trouble with these pains in my head—I foolishly allowed myself to become entangled with the creature. She used her skill, her 'manipulation,' as she called it, to entrap me, and . . . well, I fell victim to her wiles. She used to make a joke about being a witch, but indeed I begin to think now that there was more than a little truth in her boasting. Witchcraft—or devilry—she had some kind of power over me."

"And because of *that*?" Garnet strove to keep her voice steady.

"Because of that, I killed her. . . . Because I hated her, as I have never hated any other creature. As you now hate me." He took up the shirt again, and began to unbutton it, ready to slip it on.

"*Brock* . . . How can you say that?"

She crossed the room in one swift movement, and snatched the garment from his hands.

"Don't you know that I love you—I love you more than anything or anyone—more than life itself. And there is nothing you can do that will ever change that."

He averted his face.

"No—no, don't try to be kind to me," he muttered. "Don't pretend . . ."

"This is no pretense. . . . I'm speaking nothing but the simple truth, and you must believe me."

Desperately, she began to tug at the ribbons and buttons that fastened her dress. As quickly as possible, she tore off her clothes—the long, full skirts tumbled to the floor, her hands pulling aside her undergarments so impatiently that she felt the thin material rip under her fingers—and then, in a moment, her clothes were gone and she was totally naked . . . defenseless.

She held her arms outstretched before him.

"Will this convince you?" she asked, with a sob of

passion in her voice. "I am yours—body and soul—to do with what you will."

He stared at her as if he were in a dream. Her slim figure, as young and desirable as she had been the first time he had ever seen her undressed, her round, firm breasts, the smooth curve of her hips, her legs already parted and the soft shadow between her thighs trembling slightly . . .

Almost automatically he took her in his arms. Her skin was gloriously warm against his chest; and he felt her move under his hands like quicksilver, sensed the rising response of his own body as she slid down him, her arms round his thighs, her face pressing against his loins.

Hungrily, she nuzzled against him, while his masculinity stirred and hardened; for she was eager to remove his remaining garments. Her fingers fumbled with his belt, and then, with more assurance, tugged at the last buttons. After that there were no more barriers between them.

"Garnet . . . my own Garnet!" The words seemed to be dragged from the depths of his soul, as she gave herself entirely to his love.

This was a passion so fierce that neither of them could have fought against it, even if they had wished to; a force that drove them together without modesty and without shame, giving and taking love, with nothing held back.

At the pitch of their shared ecstasy, they lay together upon the floor, their limbs entwined, their senses aroused to heights of awareness they had never known before.

Garnet felt the rough pile of the carpet beneath her back, and the driving thrust of his desire penetrating her again and again, and she did not know if it were pain or pleasure that filled her, but something compounded of both and greater than either.

At last—totally satisfied and totally content—they

relaxed in each other's arms, enjoying the long, sweet ebbside of their passion as it subsided.

For a while, neither of them spoke. Then Brock said, his voice rumbling against Garnet's cheek as she lay curled up against his chest, "I must dress. . . . I must give myself up and face the consequences."

"You must not!" She pulled herself up urgently. "I won't let you—"

"My dearest girl. It is my duty, I cannot avoid that."

"But why? You know I love you. I will do anything to help you. . . . You need not make any confession. Give me the gun, and I will throw it away. I'll dispose of it somehow, don't worry—nobody will ever know—"

Brock petted her and soothed her as if she were a child.

"My darling, you are a very wonderful girl and a very loyal wife, and I don't know what I have done to deserve you. . . . But that does not affect the situation. I have no choice . . ."

He disengaged himself gently from her embrace, and stood up, preparing to dress himself.

She lay upon the floor, looking up at his legs, two strong oak trees that towered above her, packed with muscle and shaggy with curling hair. . . . And above, the heavy promise of his manhood, the outward sign of his love for her, ready at any moment to rouse again to new extremes of passion. . . . She stretched up a hand, cajoling—enticing.

"Please, Brock. Let me help you—don't go. . . . Stay with me a little longer. Let us think of another plan."

"You're a wanton creature, and I love you with all my heart, but you must not involve yourself in this matter." He smiled down at her, and reached for his breeches. "Now be good, and get dressed!"

He expected an answering smile from her, but her face was grave and anxious.

"Brock . . . what will happen to you? What is to become of us?" she asked, in a frightened whisper.

In the drawing room, Coral, now resplendent in her green silk gown, sat on the edge of a chair, nervously fidgeting with the lace upon her corsage. It was dark outside the window, and the room was aglow with candlelight that danced and flickered, sending huge shadows over the walls and ceiling.

"How much longer will it be?" she asked at last.

Gerard, who was standing at the fireplace, drumming his fingers upon the mantelpiece, looked up sharply.

"What?"

"How much longer—before they start asking questions?" she said.

"You must not be nervous. We have nothing to fear," he replied.

"Haven't we? Oh, Gerard—are you *sure*?"

He stared at her, and then came slowly toward her. "What are you saying? Are you suggesting that—Do you suppose *I* did it?"

"No, of course not—that is, I don't know *who* killed her. But someone did. And the constables will not rest until they have found the murderer," she answered, falteringly.

"You really believe I would shoot the woman, in cold blood?"

"When you went to look for her, you were so incensed. I was afraid, even then, of what you might do. You said you were going to settle matters with her, once and for all—you swore you'd put a stop to her tricks—"

"And I meant what I said, but . . . not like that. And anyway, I never found her. By the time I saw her, she was already dead."

"You never found her?" Coral repeated, bemused. "But how can that be? I told you where she would be, and you were gone for a long time—"

time enough to get to the fishpond and back again—”

“I tell you I did not!” Gerard cut in angrily. “I was—I was waylaid.” He turned his head at the sound of the door, and Dicky Blades entered the room. “Well?” he asked.

Dicky began apologetically. “The doctor is examining the body now . . . but there is another gentleman here—Constable Fenner. He wishes to speak with you.”

“Damnation. Very well, ask him to come in,” said Gerard. Dicky nodded, and retired.

“Do you know this Constable Fenner?” Coral asked.

“I knew him when I was a boy. He’s the village blacksmith, with a head as solid as the anvil in his forge.”

“But how can he be a constable if he’s a blacksmith?” Coral asked.

“The parish police are pressed into service like jurymen. They must take turns serving as officers of the Constabulary. Isn’t that the system you have in Ireland?”

“I don’t know. I never took much interest in such things,” Coral admitted. “But I don’t think the Barneys in Dublin work that way.”

“Oh, nor do the Bow Street Runners, but they’re metropolitans,” Gerard explained. “I’m talking about the local force, down here in the country. They haven’t changed much since the days of Dogberry and the Watch!”

“And you say this man Fenner is thick-headed?”

“More’s the pity. . . . The villagers with their wits about them generally find ways of avoiding constabulary service. It’s only the fools that remain in office. They’re either foolish—or avaricious.”

“How does avarice come into it?”

“Hush, you’ll soon find out,” Gerard silenced Coral, as the door reopened.

Dicky entered with Constable Fenner, a giant of a

man, with massive shoulders and biceps that seemed to be straining to split the sleeves of his dark blue tunic. Clutching his shabby beaver hat in two massive paws, he sketched a bow at Coral and an awkward greeting for Gerard.

"Ma'am. Mr. Mallory, sir. Your humble and obedient servant. This is a very distressing matter, ain't it? Very aggravating and unfortunate, to be sure . . ."

"Good evening, Constable. Yes, it's a bad business, and the sooner we can get it cleared up, the better."

"Oh, it won't be a speedy inquiry, sir, you can depend on that. There'll be question and answers from here to kingdom come, inquests and crownors and arrests and goodness knows what."

"Arrests?" Coral clasped her hands tightly. "You mean, you have your suspicions of somebody, already?"

"As to that, ma'am, I cannot divulge. . . . We have to keep mum about our discoveries, you see, but I can tell you this—there'll be advertising a-plenty, and big rewards, I shouldn't wonder."

Coral turned to Gerard, completely lost. "I don't understand—rewards? Advertising?"

Gerard nodded. "That's how the constables operate, as a rule. They publish advertisements, seeking any information that may lead to the arrest of the criminal, and various interested parties put up reward money to encourage the informers."

"Last murder case as I was on, there was a hundred guineas offered by the squire, and another hundred from a body of public-spirited citizens in the locality—plus fifty from the dead man's widder, and another fifty from the justices. Three hundred all told, that one was worth . . ." Constable Fenner's smile faded. "But all we found was one blood-stained glove, and we *never* did catch a hand to fit it. . . . So tweren't no good to nobody, in the end. . . . Murder by person or persons unknown, the crowner said."

"Perhaps that will happen again in this case," said Coral.

"Not if I knows it," said the Constable, with an air of determination. "I'm going to lay hold of this villain, whoever he is, and this time somebody's going to swing for it! You mark my words!"

"But if there's no suspect—and no motive," began Dicky, uneasily.

"We'll find a suspect before we've done, have no fear, sir!" the Constable retorted. "And as for a motive, it's my belief it's a crime of passion. . . . Young female person discovered unclothed—if you'll pardon the liberty, ma'am—it all adds up to one thing, don't it? Plain as a pikestaff!"

Gerard and Coral exchanged glances, and Dicky cleared his throat.

"Now then," the Constable continued. "Let's get down to business, if you please. To begin with, the name of this aforesaid young female person?"

"Mayne . . . Miss Cassandra Mayne," said Gerard. "She was employed in the household as a companion to Lady Savage."

"Ah, quite so—and how long had the aforesaid Miss Mayne been in residence here?"

"Since the family returned from overseas, I understand, not above a month or so."

"Aha! That's interesting." The Constable closed one eye. "Very interesting indeed."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, stands to reason, Miss Mayne being a newcomer to the district, she didn't have much chance to make acquaintance with any members of the opposite gender. So it must all have happened very recent, so to speak. . . . Who had the young lady become acquainted with—very recently?"

There was a long silence, and Dicky Blades felt the tips of his ears turning slowly crimson.

"Well, there was me, for a start," he said at last. "I mean, I only arrived here very recently myself—

and I got to know her slightly, even in that short space of time. She was the sort of person who makes friends quite rapidly, if you see what I mean."

"But you wouldn't say you and her was—how shall I put it?—close?" the Constable pursued doggedly.

"Oh—no, I'd describe it as a very slight acquaintance," said Dicky. "I didn't know her all that *well*, you understand."

"And is there anyone else who did know the lady—well?" asked the Constable.

"Yes. I did," said Brock.

He stepped into the room, with Garnet on his arm.

"Brock—no, *please*," she whispered.

"Ah—Sir Broccard Savage, I believe?" The Constable bowed and smiled again. "We've not had the pleasure before, Sir Broccard, but I've seen you about in the village, and of course I've known your good lady ever since she was no more than a tiny tot. Miss Garnet and Master Gerard used to bring their ponies to be shod at the smithy, ever since they was old enough to get up in the saddle!"

"Remarkable," grunted Brock. "And now you're here in your capacity as constable, rather than blacksmith, I understand?"

"You've hit it, sir—fair and square. I'm here to make inquiries into the death of this certain deceased young lady. And you was just saying as how you knew her well?"

"I knew her well enough to detest the woman," said Brock crisply. "Will that satisfy you?"

"Detest her? Come, sir, have a care—that's an awkward sort of remark to pass about a young person so recently murdered—"

"Brock, don't say any more," Garnet begged him. But it was too late.

Brock Savage took two paces into the center of the room.

"I am not trying to conceal anything or excuse anything. I am here solely to tell you the fact—that I

shot Cassandra Mayne, deliberately, and with intent to kill."

The atmosphere was electric. Nobody moved, but a draught from the open doorway set all the candle flames shuddering in a frenzy, so that the drawing room seemed full of leaping shadows.

"You killed her? Why?" asked Gerard, hoarsely.

"That is all I am prepared to say. I prefer not to explain my motives," said Brock. "Isn't that enough for you, Constable? A complete confession?"

"Well—yes, sir, I suppose—if you put it like that." The Constable seemed curiously reluctant to accept Brock's admission. "But it's very irregular—without no advertisement and no rewards—very irregular indeed."

"Good God, man, what more do you want? I tell you I shot the woman—I killed her. Let's get this legal farce over and done with!"

"With respect, Sir Broccard. . . . I must correct you upon one point," said another voice, as a newcomer appeared in the doorway.

Garnet welcomed him eagerly. "Doctor Howard, come in. Brock, this is Doctor Howard—you remember, he used to attend upon my father—"

"And I had the pleasure of assisting your small daughter to enter into this world," the Doctor added cheerfully. He was an angular, elderly man with dusty gray hair and a pair of spectacles that flashed in the candlelight as he beamed around the assembled company.

"Master Gerard," he went on, with a cordial gesture of greeting. "And this must be your beautiful young wife. I am pleased to meet you, Mrs. Mallory."

Coral acknowledged him politely, and Garnet introduced Captain Blades. Once these formalities were concluded, Brock returned to the original topic.

"What did you mean, Doctor—when you said you must correct me?"

"On a point of some importance, sir, for you

claim that you shot the late Cassandra Mayne and killed her."

"Well, sir? Do you dispute that?"

"I do indeed, Sir Broccard. I am prepared to accept that you put a bullet into her—but you did not kill her."

"What?"

Garnet gripped Brock's hand tightly.

"Are you saying she—she is not—"

"Oh, no—don't misunderstand me, my lady. Cassandra Mayne is dead, no question of that. But she was not killed by the bullet you fired, Sir Broccard. She was killed by a quantity of water entering her lungs."

The Doctor took out a snuffbox, and with maddening deliberation put a pinch on the back of his hand and inhaled.

"When you fired that pistol at her, sir, you committed no crime at all—for the lady was already dead. . . . She had been drowned."

Immediately, everyone began talking at once.

"Drowned? But surely if she had been drowned—"

"I know she went swimming, but how did she get out onto the bank if—"

"There was nobody with her, was there?"

"You mean she was accidentally drowned and somehow managed to struggle out of the water before—"

The Doctor's voice cut through the babble, clipped and clear.

"I mean that someone drowned Miss Mayne in the pond and then dragged her out on the grass and left her there. The marks of bruising upon the body are quite unmistakable. She had been held under water until she was dead. Somebody had already ended her life when you appeared on the scene, Sir Broccard."

"Somebody," repeated Garnet. "But who?"

"Person or persons unknown!" answered Consta-

ble Fenner, almost hugging himself with delight. "Oh, aye, this is going to be a regular inquiry after all—advertising and rewards and such like. . . . *Somebody's* wanted for murder—and *somebody's* going to swing for it!"

Chapter Two

THE PRICE OF SILENCE

Constable Fenner's undisguised enthusiasm was somewhat disconcerting.

As he said the words: "Somebody's going to swing for it"—he made a graphic gesture with his two broad, blunt hands, indicating the tightening of a noose around a neck. Garnet flinched, and looked at Brock for reassurance.

"What will happen now?" asked Brock evenly.

"The good Constable will continue his inquiries, I presume," replied Dr. Howard, dabbing at his bony nose with a square of cambric.

"But—my confession!"

"... Is worthless, Sir Broccard. You must realize that, surely. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if there is one person at Rosewood who could *not* have killed Miss Cassandra Mayne, that person is *you!*"

Garnet felt her heart leap with relief. Here, at least, was a consolation she had not expected.

Constable Fenner frowned, struggling with this new thought, "I can't agree there, Doctor. There's nobody cleared of the crime till it be proved who drowned the young woman. . . . Anyone could have done it—"

"Not quite anyone, surely. For if Sir Broccard had already taken the step of drowning his victim, he would hardly have returned half an hour later and put a bullet through her as well, would he? No, I

think we may take it that you are totally exonerated, Sir Broccard."

Unwillingly, Fenner was forced to accept this, though he added, "All the same, I'd still like to know *why* the gentleman thought it necessary to shoot the woman. It was an attempt at murder—he's admitted that—and if we knew what 'twas that drove him to such desperate measures, we might discover a motive for someone else to have done the deed."

Brock shook his head. "No, sir. I swear to you as God is my judge that my motive was entirely personal and particular, and could have no application to anyone else in the world."

"But if you'd only tell us—"

"I'm sorry. I have already said that I do not choose to give any explanation."

"It seems that you must content yourself with that, Constable," said the Doctor. "Well, gentlemen, ladies—I must take my leave of you. I have already made arrangements for the body to be removed to the undertakers. And I shall, of course, put in a full report of the cause of death to the authorities."

With another angular bow, he departed, leaving the Constable scratching his head. Fenner had the uncomfortable feeling that he was out of his depth in this case. It was easy enough to exercise the duties of the law when it was a matter of a cowman surprising his wife *in flagrante* with a tinker, and impaling the pair of them with a pitchfork in a sudden jealous rage. And when Miss Murdlestone at the Grange poisoned her elderly father in an attempt to receive her inheritance, it was simple enough to check her purchase of arsenical weed killer from the apothecary. But this strange affair seemed to be shrouded in mystery; and apart from all other considerations, the worthy blacksmith felt ill-at-ease when it came to dealing with the gentry. He wished heartily that Mr. Fothergill were here to give him moral support, Mr. Fothergill being his superior officer—the parish constable in

charge of all inquiries and the village schoolmaster as well, a subtle, educated man, not easily put out of countenance.

However, Fenner tried to do the best he could, under the circumstances. Squaring his hefty shoulders, he addressed Brock again.

"There is one other little matter, sir," he continued. "The gun you used, the pistol. I shall require to produce that as evidence at the inquest. Perhaps you'll be good enough to let me have it?"

"Why, yes, if it's really necessary," said Brock. "It's in the bedroom, upstairs. . . . Shall I fetch it?"

"I'll accompany you, sir, if you please," said the Constable.

So Brock left the room with Constable Fenner at his heels, and Garnet followed them, a few paces to the rear.

There was a long silence in the drawing room after they had left. At length, Dicky cleared his throat again, looking neither at Gerard nor at Coral.

"If old Brock didn't kill the woman, I suppose that means it must have been you or me—eh, Mr. Malory?"

"Certainly not," said Gerard. "It could have been an outsider—a total stranger, trespassing on the estate, who discovered her at the fishpond and—"

"It need not have been a man who did it," said Coral thoughtfully. "She could quite well have been attacked while she was bathing—by another woman. . . . I could have done it myself."

The two men stared at her, then Dicky said, "But you had no reason to wish her dead. Did you?"

Something in his tone struck Coral as strange, and she turned on him swiftly.

"Did *you*?" she asked.

There was another silence. The atmosphere was heavy with unanswered questions.

Brock led the way into the master bedroom. He

walked straight to the little bedside table where he had left the pistol—and stopped.

"It's gone," he said.

"Beg pardon, sir?" Fenner ducked his head apologetically. He was not accustomed to entering the private apartments of the nobility, and the sight of Garnet's negligee across the end of the bed made him uneasy.

"I tell you it has gone, vanished, disappeared into thin air," said Brock.

Garnet followed him, saying, "But that is not possible. I saw it too—it was there when we left this room to go downstairs."

"Then someone has been in and taken it."

"Who'd do a thing like that?" asked the Constable blankly.

"I don't know. It could have been anybody," said Brock.

"Well . . . I'll have to report it as missing, I s'pose." Constable Fenner shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. "Um, begging your pardon, there is just one other thing, afore I go . . ."

"Well?"

"I shan't need to trouble *you* any further tonight, sir, but must ask some questions of Master Gerard—Mister Mallory, I should say. . . . May I have your permission to use the drawing room, to conduct my inquiries?"

"Yes, I suppose so—but what the devil do you want with Gerard? He scarcely knew Miss Mayne."

"That's as may be, sir," said Fenner doggedly. "My job is to leave no stone unturned, as you might say . . . Thanking you kindly. I daresay I'll see you both tomorrow."

He nodded at them amiably enough and set off once more, moving with surprising speed for a man of his bulk. He looked, Garnet thought, a little like an oversized terrier on the track of a rat.

Once the door had closed, Brock said flatly,

NEW MOON

"There's one question he did not think to ask me."

"What's that?" said Garnet.

"He never asked about ammunition for the pistol. There were three more bullets with it—and they're gone as well."

When the Constable returned to interrogate Gerard, Dicky Blades found himself being politely dismissed, and made his escape gratefully.

It was still comparatively early, but he decided to keep out of everyone's way, and retired to bed. Consequently, when there was a knock at his bedroom door, some fifteen minutes later, he was not expecting company.

"Who is it?" he called, a little puzzled.

"It's me, Garnet. . . . May I come in?"

"Yes, very well—come in."

She entered the room and hesitated, for Dicky was now attired in his nightshirt, lathering his face and hands at the washstand.

"Oh. I beg your pardon, I did not realize you were going to bed so early," she began.

"It doesn't matter, old ch—Garnet. Sit down, make yourself comfortable. I shan't be a moment." He rinsed his face, then scrubbed himself dry with a towel. His hair stood on end, and Garnet could not help remembering yet again the young ensign who had been her daily companion and best friend for such a long while.

"What's up, Garnet?" Dicky asked.

She sat on the bed and in answer to his question offered him the red morocco purse.

"This is yours, isn't it? I know it by the initials."

He took it from her slowly, and looked inside.

"Yes. Yes, it's mine . . . where did you get it?"

"I found it by accident in Cassie's room, earlier today. . . . I thought you had better have it back—in case the Constable should take it into his head to make a search through her effects. I'm afraid a little of

the money may be missing. She spent some at the Fair, you see."

"Oh. Thank you . . . I'm very glad to have it back."

He turned away and slipped the purse into the pocket of his tunic, hanging on the back of a chair. Garnet realized that he was making an effort to conceal his real feelings, and wondered why.

"Don't feel diffident about it. I know Cassie was a thief," she continued. "Oh, I liked her. I liked her a lot, but I realize now that I only saw one side of her. She stole something from me as well, you weren't the only one."

He said nothing. She noticed that the line of his back was stiff and tense under the thin nightshirt.

"What's wrong, Dicky?" She patted the space next to her upon the bed, saying, "Come and sit here, talk to me. . . . Tell me what is the matter."

Slowly, he moved across to her, and she saw his troubled frown.

"What is it? Didn't you know it was Cassie who took the purse?"

"Oh, yes, I knew that. . . . She didn't steal it, though. I gave it to her."

"*What?*" She stared at him. "I don't understand."

He sat beside her, his boyish face flushed.

"Don't ask me, Garnet. I'd rather not talk of it, if you don't mind . . ."

"But I want to find out the truth. Don't you see, until we know what really happened, we shall all be caught up in this web of suspicion and doubt and accusation. . . . Tell me, Dicky, please . . ."

"I can't, it's—it's a little shaming," he said hesitantly.

She smiled and put her arm around his shoulders impulsively.

"Come now. There's nothing you and I need ever be ashamed to admit, between ourselves? I feel closer to you than any man I ever met, except Brock, of

course. We need not keep secrets from one another, surely?"

"It's a matter of—of immoral behavior. I'd feel ashamed to admit to anyone—"

"Anyone except me, Dicky. Forget I'm a woman. Think of me as a brother officer, just as you used to."

She was holding him tightly. She could feel his body rigid against her.

"It's very difficult for me to forget that you are a woman, Garnet—particularly at this moment," he muttered.

"Man or woman, what does it matter? We're fond of one another. We can be honest with each other—we've nothing to hide. Dicky, I wouldn't press you for an answer, but this is serious."

She hugged him as she spoke, as she had once or twice hugged him when they were soldiering in Spain—like two young animals who clung together from sheer high spirits, only now there was a difference. . . . Hardly knowing what prompted her, she put her face up to Dicky and kissed him upon the lips.

"*Please,*" she repeated.

Suddenly he made a move. In his turn, he put his arms about her, held her very tightly, and at the same time he kissed her again. But now his tongue thrust between her lips, demanding a response.

For a second she was lost, overwhelmed by the sudden blaze of desire that took her completely by surprise. They broke apart, breathing quickly, and she looked searchingly into his eyes.

"You know we're playing with fire, don't you, young 'un?" he whispered.

"No—Dicky, I'm sorry—I didn't mean—"

She pulled herself free, confused and remorseful. She was all too conscious now of the new developments in their relationship, of the fact that he was obviously in a state of physical excitement, under that skimpy nightshirt, and aware too of something in herself that answered to his passion . . .

"I didn't stop to think. Forgive me, I was so determined to find out the truth . . ."

She stood up, smoothing down her dress, unable to look at him.

"And you found more than you bargained for? Well, that's what makes the world go round . . ." Dicky leaned back upon his elbows and watched her, a little touched, a little amused even by her precipitate retreat. Now he felt slightly more in command of the situation.

"All right, I will tell you since you think it's so important. I made love to Cassandra Mayne—and afterward she forced me to hand over all the money I had . . . so I gave her my purse."

Garnet whirled round and stared at him incredulously. "You mean she took payment for her favors?"

"Oh, no. It wasn't that. . . . She blackmailed me. When she had me off guard and helpless, she threw a bombshell by telling me she knew all about you and me campaigning together. God alone knows how she discovered it."

"Very easily indeed. I told her myself. I saw no harm in it at the time. She promised she would never tell anyone else."

"I wonder what that promise was worth. For she told me that she would write an account of our adventures and publish it too—to humiliate you and your husband, and make me look like the greatest jackass in the land—unless I paid her off. That purse was the price of my silence."

Garnet's expression was enigmatic, unreadable.

"She was capable of *that* . . . and I never even suspected it. What a fool I have been!"

She glanced back at Dicky once more, and concluded, "I must go. Thank you for telling me . . . and—I'm sorry if I have disturbed you. Good night."

She flashed a brief smile, touched her fingertips to her lips, then brushed them lightly against his mouth and was gone.

Dicky lay back at full length on the bed and groaned, feeling his sexual longing as a physical ache. To think of all the nights he had spent alone with this wonderful girl . . . to think of the opportunity that had just slipped through his fingers—here and now upon this bed—

With a curse, he pulled himself up and angrily tore off his nightshirt. There was some cold water still left in the washstand jug. He would have to give himself an icy scrubdown if he were to get any sleep at all tonight!

As Dicky prepared to mortify the flesh, Garnet hastened along the corridors, returning to her own room.

She found Brock sitting with his head in his hands, and hurried to his side. "Brock, my darling. Listen, for I have something to tell you. I have just made an amazing discovery."

"And what is that?" He looked up wearily.

"I have been talking to Dicky, to Captain Blades." While she was speaking she began to undress, and Brock watched as she unlaced her gown and slipped it from her shoulders. "He has admitted to me that he was being blackmailed by Cassie."

Brock's chin lifted but he remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

"He had been indiscreet, and she won his confidence, I suppose, as she won mine. . . . I was foolish enough to tell her of my adventures in the Peninsular, so Cassie extorted money from Dicky, under threat that she would publish the whole story."

Brock's face darkened, but still he did not speak.

"Well, once I knew that Cassie could even contemplate such a thing—that made me see everything in a very different light."

In her petticoat, Garnet sat at the dressing table and unpinned her hair, letting the tresses fall to her

shoulders. Brock heard the steady rhythmic whisper as she brushed it out.

"You see, Brock, it made sense of something I never understood until now." She looked into the glass and watched his reflection as she continued, "You kept saying she demanded money from you, that she would drain you dry. . . . Could it be that she was blackmailing you as well?"

This was it—the direct question that he had been dreading to hear.

"Yes," he replied quietly. "You're quite right, of course."

"And all on account of one moment of weakness, when you allowed yourself to be seduced. Would you really go to such lengths to cover up one indiscretion?" she asked sadly.

"It was not for that. There was something else—oh, God, there was something else!"

Suddenly he was galvanized into action. He stood up and went swiftly to Garnet, his hands upon her shoulders, meeting her eyes in the looking glass.

"I should have told you the whole truth from the very beginning, I see that now. I was trying to spare you. I'm afraid this will come as a great shock to you, my dearest."

Garnet was very pale, but she was determined to hear him out. "Tell me," she said.

Quite slowly, and with painstaking accuracy, he went through the entire unhappy story of his first marriage. He told her of Lydia's infidelity and her flight with the coachman Soames—and the accident that led everyone to presume them to be dead. Then he went on to narrate the second part of the history—Cassie's revelation that the runaways were in fact still alive and living together.

"You realize what this means, of course," he said finally. "What it means to you and me, and to Ivory . . ."

"Yes . . . I understand," she said.

"I have done one sensible thing since I learned this news. I have written a letter to Mr. Nicholas Soames, in Yeovil. I sent it care of the parish clerk. I trust it will reach him safely—and I have offered to give Lydia a divorce, so that we may make some attempt to regularize matters."

"I don't care," said Garnet.

He screwed up his eyes, trying to read the look on her face. "What—what did you say?"

"I said I don't care." Garnet swung around to him, putting down the hairbrush, and holding out her arms. "Don't you understand, Brock? If we can still be married in law, all well and good, but if not—I know that you and I are married in the sight of heaven, for we love one another truly, and our daughter is the living testament to that love. I am yours, and so is she. Nothing else matters."

Hardly able to speak, he cradled her head against his breast, saying huskily, "Thank you, my dear . . . thank you for that."

"And when I remember it was to try and protect me from this discovery that you were actually prepared to—" She broke off impatiently. "Oh, Brock, don't you realize? We can face any storms, you and I, as long as we are together."

She stood up and kissed him with such love and trust that he felt humbled by her sincerity.

"But there is still something more we have to know, Brock. Something very important."

"What do you mean?"

"If Cassie has been extorting money from you and from Dicky, isn't it possible that she may have had other victims too? One other, at least. The man who killed her. . . . Perhaps, in the end, it was her life that was the price of silence."

She continued to undress, thinking aloud. "Who else could she have been blackmailing, I wonder?"

Downstairs in the drawing room, Constable Fenner

was still pursuing his laborious investigation. Gerard and Coral exchanged glances and fretted impatiently as the slow questions dragged on, but they did not wish to antagonize the Constable.

"Now, sir, another point, if you please." Deliberately, Fenner licked the end of a blunt pencil and turned to a fresh page in his notebook. "I have to establish the whereabouts of every member of the household at the time of the murder. Where were you when you heard the shot?"

"I was in the stableyard," replied Gerard.

"Thank you, sir—*sta-ble. . . . yard*," the Constable wrote at a snail's pace, with round, childish characters. "And where were you during the time previous—let us say, the half-hour before that?"

"Why, I," Gerard hesitated, then said firmly, "I was with my wife, in our bedroom."

Coral flicked an unwary glance at him, and this did not go unnoticed.

"Yes, ma'am? You were about to say something?" The Constable looked up, inquiringly.

"No, nothing . . ." Coral shook her head.

"And you can confirm that Mr. Mallory was with you all that time?"

"Constable, I don't see the relevance of these questions," Gerard began.

"Why, sir, as you know, the deceased was already drowned before the shot was fired. During the foregoing half-hour, as near as the Doctor could reckon. So *that's* the vital time in question, you see."

"But I don't understand why you are asking Gerard these things," Coral burst out indignantly. "Surely you don't suspect *him* of being the murderer?"

"Like I said, ma'am, I have to explore every avenue," said Fenner gravely.

"Oh, that's ridiculous. You told us yourself, you've known Gerard since he was a child. You know he's incapable of such a thing—"

"I knew him *when* he was a child, ma'am; but

that's a different matter, ain't it?" Fenner smiled sadly. "He's been away since then. Off to the wars, they tell me, off to get married too, it seems! A lot has happened since the days when young Master Gerard used to bring his pony to be shod at the old smithy."

He began to make another entry in his notebook, then paused, "Let me see now, when did you leave home, exactly? How many years ago would that be?"

"Four years, almost exactly," said Gerard. "Though what difference that can possibly make—"

"And you went out to Spain and Portugal, as a young soldier. Then later you were shipped off to America, is that right? And where was it you met your good lady, may I ask?"

"In Ireland," Gerard answered automatically—and at the same instant Coral answered, "In America . . ."

They stopped and looked at one another.

"Seems to be a slight difference of opinion, like." Fenner eyed them with interest. "Which was it now—in Ireland? or in America?"

"We met in Ireland, and we were married in America," said Coral quickly.

"I went to Ireland in between leaving Spain and going on to fight in the United States," Gerard explained.

"Rather a roundabout way to go, from what I knew of it." Fenner scratched his head. "Still, I'm not a great one for geography and such—and it's easy enough checked, anyhow. . . . Well, now, when you was in the army, Master Gerard, did you ever happen to meet Miss Mayne?"

"Of course not! I never set eyes on her until I came back to Rosewood!"

"But I understand the major-general met her first in Belgium, at the time of Waterloo. Did you not see her there?"

"I did not serve at Waterloo," said Gerard shortly.

"No? You surprise me, sir. I'd have thought they needed every able-bodied young officer upon that battlefield . . ."

"I had already given up my commission and left the regiment," Gerard cut in. "Look here, I cannot see that any of this is helping your inquiries, and my wife and I are both very tired. We're anxious to retire for the night."

"Ah—yes, sir, quite so. I've been letting my tongue run away with me," Fenner nodded. "Very well, I won't trouble you no more tonight, but perhaps tomorrow we may continue our little conversation?"

"If necessary," said Gerard. He crossed the room and opened the door. "Let me show you out, Constable."

"No need for that, sir. I know my way. Good night to you, sir—and you too, ma'am. I hope you both sleep well." With one last sly smile, he bobbed his head and departed.

When the door was closed, Coral whispered, "What did he mean by that? What is he hinting at?"

"He could tell he'd got me on the raw. He's not going to give up, either. You realize what this means, don't you? If they check back in my military record, they'll find I've been telling a pack of lies . . . I was never in Spain or Portugal. I was in Ireland, with you."

"Suppose they find that you were reported as missing, believed to be killed in battle . . . can they charge you with desertion?" Coral asked.

"God knows. All I know is that I'm in desperate trouble."

She took his hand. "Tell me just one thing."

"What's that?"

"Why did you lie about the half-hour when Cassie was drowned? You said you were with me, but you weren't. When I asked you earlier on, you said you were waylaid. . . . What happened, Gerard? Why couldn't you tell him the truth?"

NEW MOON

He scowled, pulling away from her.

"I couldn't, that's all. And I'm sick and tired of being questioned! Go to bed, for heaven's sake."

She looked at him, as he made for the door. "Where are you going?"

"Out for a walk. I need to get some fresh air."

"But Gerard, who was it waylaid you? Just tell me that—"

But he was already out of the room.

At the same moment, Dicky Blades lay in his bed, frustrated and unhappy. He gazed up into the dark, visualizing Garnet's face, imagining the feel of her body in his arms . . .

Suddenly he heard the sound of the door creaking quietly open. Then, incredibly, Garnet's voice came to him through the blackness of the room, soft and low.

"Dicky. Are you still awake? I've got to talk to you."

He took a deep breath, then said, "What is it now?"

"Oh, thank goodness. I was afraid you were asleep. . . . Shall I light the candle?"

"No, don't do that. We can talk in the dark. Come here."

She obeyed, groping her way across to the bed.

"I wouldn't have bothered you again, but it only occurred to me just now—you may be able to tell me something."

"Ssh, keep your voice down. If anyone hears you in this room—"

"Oh, that doesn't matter now. This could be very important. Listen, suppose Cassie were blackmailing other people, as well as you. Did she ever say anything that would give you that impression? Did she ever hint at anyone else who—"

Garnet had reached the bed by now, and she heard the rustle of sheets as Dicky threw back the bed-

clothes, then to her surprise, she felt his hands grasping her wrists.

"Come here, come to me, Garnet," he said breathlessly.

"What are you doing? No, Dicky—stop!"

"You changed your mind, didn't you? You came back to me after all—"

"No! Let go of me, don't be silly!" She struggled to get free, but he pulled her down toward him upon the bed, and she discovered to her dismay that he was naked. Her hands touched his thighs, the rough prickle of his body hair, the strong, erect masculinity, hot and hard beneath her fingers—

"Dicky, stop this at once! I *am* going to light the candle."

She managed to break away from him, and a second later a bright yellow flame spurted up, dazzling both of them.

Dicky was lying stretched out across the rumpled bed, and he tried clumsily to pull up the sheets and cover his rampant excitement.

"Don't be embarrassed," she said gently. "Have you forgotten? I've seen all there is to see, many times! . . . And we know one another much too well for such nonsense. Here, put on your dressing gown." She tossed it to him and waited as he fumbled his way into it, then continued, "I meant what I said—I should not have troubled you again tonight, but this might be a matter of life and death. I couldn't wait till the morning."

"What is it you want to know, exactly?" he asked.

"Simply this. When you talked to Cassie, did she ever mention that she had a hold over any other person, someone who—"

She broke off abruptly, and they both listened. There was a sharp, metallic rattle . . . a pause . . . and there it was again.

"Somebody's chucking gravel up at my window,"

NEW MOON

said Dicky. "What an extraordinary thing! What's going on?"

He crossed the room and pulled the curtains at the casement wide open. Instantly, there was a deafening explosion, and a shower of broken glass tinkled to the floor.

"Hell's teeth!" shouted Dicky, ducking for cover. "Infernal cheek! Some bugger's taken a pot shot at me—!"

They found the bullet imbedded in the ceiling. It had missed Dicky's head only by a matter of inches.

Chapter Three

MANHUNT

"Whoever it is, he's out there in the garden!" exclaimed Dicky and made for the door.

"Dicky, come back—take care! We know he's armed. He may attack again—" Garnet began, but he would not stay to argue.

"You don't think I'm letting him escape scot free, do you?" he called over his shoulder, as he raced off along the corridor, with the skirts of his dressing gown flapping about his bare legs.

The noise had aroused the household, and when Garnet reached her own room, she found Brock coming out to look for her.

"Thank God you're safe," he said fervently, putting his arms around her. "Who fired that shot?"

"I don't know . . . it came from the garden. Someone threw a handful of gravel up at the window, and when Dicky—Captain Blades—pulled open the curtains, he made himself an easy target. Luckily the bullet went wide of the mark, or else he would be dead by now."

Coral joined them, in night attire like the rest, and she overheard the last few words.

"What is it? Is anyone hurt?" she asked breathlessly.

"No. Captain Blades had a narrow escape—somebody tried to kill him. He's gone outside to try and catch the assassin," explained Garnet.

Brock called to some of the sleepy servants who were whispering nervously at the head of the stairs,

"You men, fetch lanterns and we will make a search of the grounds. There is a dangerous villain at large, and he must be taken before any more lives are lost."

So the search party set out, and Garnet and Coral glanced uneasily at one another. They did not want to go out into the night, but neither did they wish to stay behind; they had to know what was going on. With one accord, they followed the men, ready to face whatever terrors might lie in wait for them.

The night was unfriendly. The waning moon had been completely obscured by thick cloud, and the only glimmer of light came from the lanterns that bobbed and winked among the trees.

The girls picked their way with difficulty along the garden paths, anxious not to be left behind. Then, as if to make their quest even more uncomfortable, it began to rain. At first only a few heavy drops fell, but soon the shower turned to a storm. The heavens opened, and the grounds of Rosewood Hall were deluged in a veritable cloudburst. The golden autumn weather had broken at last.

Somewhere at the far end of the rose garden, Dicky stood and shivered as the icy rain soaked through his dressing gown and the drowned grass clung to his bare feet. But it was not only the discomfort that he cursed under his breath; it was the noise of the torrential downfall that drowned all other sounds. He could no longer hear the telltale footsteps of his quarry in the darkness.

Until the rain began, he had been listening intently, his ears alert for the slightest clue—a broken twig, the swish of a branch pushed aside—and he had been certain he was gaining on his would-be assailant.

Now it was hopeless. All he could hear was the drumming of raindrops on wet leaves. Somewhere to the rear, he was aware of flashing lights and distant shouting. He cursed again, hoping that this new diversion would not give the criminal a chance to escape in the turmoil.

He pressed on into the pitch-blackness before him, straining his eyes to see what lay ahead. His outstretched hands encountered a spiky wet shape—he had blundered into the yew hedge at the end of the orchard—and he recoiled clumsily, turning aside. An instant later, he came into violent collision with a moving body. Gasping a muffled oath, Dicky grappled with his unknown opponent.

"Oh, no, you don't!" he shouted. "I've got you now!"

The other man tried to pull free, but Dicky lunged at him with all his might. They slid on the muddy grass and rolled over together, each one striving for mastery.

"You murdering swine," Dicky panted, getting a grip upon the other's throat, and trying to dodge the blows that fell upon him.

His dressing gown tore open as they wrestled on the slippery turf, and he realized with dismay that he was at a serious disadvantage, for the attacker raised his knee, aiming at his defenseless groin.

Dicky gave an indignant yelp and tried to wriggle free, and as they struggled fiercely the rest of the search party caught up with them.

In the light of the lanterns, they presented a surprising spectacle—Dicky now forced on to his back, stark naked but for the sodden dressing gown beneath his shoulders, while Gerard, in shirt and breeches, sat astride him, pinning him down.

"Gerard!" Garnet and Coral both spoke at once, in varying tones of shock and alarm.

"Let go of him, Gerard . . . and Captain Blades—kindly adjust your clothing," grunted Brock. "Then perhaps you will have the goodness to explain what the devil is going on here?"

"This damned idiot nearly choked the life out of me," gasped Gerard, massaging his windpipe as he scrambled to his feet.

"I thought you were the murderer. I was after the

blackguard who tried to put a bullet through me," mumbled Dicky, pulling the dressing gown about him.

The misunderstanding was soon explained. Gerard had been walking alone in the garden, taking a breath of air before turning in for the night, when he heard the gunshot. He followed the sound, but by the time he arrived the mysterious marksman—whoever he was—had fled, and Gerard tried in vain to catch him.

When Dicky joined the manhunt, each had begun stalking the other; and in the confusion that ensued, it seemed that the real murderer had taken his chance to slip away.

"Well, we're doing no good here, that's quite certain," said Brock. "Let us all get back indoors, before we catch our deaths of cold."

They were all soaked to the skin, and it was a damp and depressed little group that stumbled back to the house, anxious to be out of the filthy weather.

Only Gerard did not return with the others. Coral looked around for him and saw him moving off—a shadow merging into deeper shadow—going in a different direction around the corner of the building.

She hesitated for an instant, then followed her husband.

This was the way, she knew, to the stableyard, and she wondered what drew him there. She made as little noise as possible, as she passed under the stone archway, and stepped cautiously across the cobblestones.

There was one oil lamp alight in the coach house, and by its faint yellow gleam, she could just see Gerard disappearing through the open door that led to the loose-boxes. She moved into the doorway and stood watching him.

Gerard was in the act of saddling up one of the horses. He seemed to sense her presence and looked round; instantly she knew what was in his mind.

"Don't," she said softly.

ROSEWOOD

"Don't what?" He stared at her, on guard. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't do it. Don't go. You were thinking of running away, weren't you?" she said.

She was not accusing him; she was not angry. She simply stated the fact.

He stopped what he was doing, and turned from her.

"Yes," he said at last. "It seemed to be my only hope. . . . Oh, what's the use? You know now."

He sank down on to a pile of straw in an empty stall, his shoulders slumped in an attitude of despair.

"Tell me one thing," she asked, trying to keep her voice under control. "Did you do it? Did you drown that woman—and did you try to shoot the Captain?"

"No, I did not. But what's the good of saying that? I am the principal suspect." He ran a hand through his wet hair, pushing it out of his eyes. "We both know I had a strong motive for killing Cassandra Mayne. . . . And tonight I was in the garden when the shot was fired—Blades actually caught me. I could tell what everyone must be thinking. True, I haven't got a pistol, but what of that? I could have thrown it away. And tomorrow that infernal constable is going to come back with more questions . . ."

He closed his eyes. Suddenly he was very tired.

"They'll find out that I deserted from the army . . . they'll find out I ran away to Ireland, and with any luck, they'll even find out that I was in trouble there too, and am still wanted by the police in Dublin for a crime I did not commit. . . . I can protect my innocence from now until doomsday, but who is going to believe me?"

Coral walked over to him, and put her hand on his shoulder. "I am," she said.

He looked up at her, wearily. "Are you sure? You doubted me too, a moment ago. You've just asked me if I committed murder."

"And you told me you did not. I believe you, my

love," she told him. "But if you run away now to-night, everyone else will be quite certain that you are guilty, and they will never rest until you are caught and tried for these crimes. That is why you must stay here with me—and Blaise. We will face the whole world and convince them that you are innocent."

"Coral . . ." He spoke her name so quietly she could scarcely hear it, and he took her hand, pressing it to his lips.

"Now you must come into the house and change into dry clothes. You're wet through," she said.

"And so are you. But I don't want to go indoors yet and have to face them all, and their suspicions . . . not just yet . . ."

With new confidence now, he rose to his feet and began to unfasten the icy shirt that clung to him.

"There are horse blankets here. We shall soon get warm, once we have dried ourselves. Take your clothes off, Coral."

She looked at him and smiled. At the same moment he met her glance. They both knew that they were remembering the same thing.

"Our wedding day, in New Orleans. How cold and wet we were that morning!" Coral said.

"But that day we stripped off our clothes in a church. Here we shall undress in more humble surroundings," he added. "Don't waste any more time, do as I do, or we shall both catch the ague!"

It was true. Coral realized that she was quite numb with cold, and the damp seemed to have penetrated to her very bones.

With shaking fingers, she took off her negligee and began to untie the ribbons that fastened her night-dress. Both these garments were completely soaked, and they stuck to her skin so that she had some difficulty in slipping them off.

As she did so, Gerard, in the act of peeling off his sodden breeches, looked across at her and said suddenly:

"I don't think I could have done it, you know."

"What?" She paused, the wet material halfway down her thighs.

"I don't think I could ever have gone off and left you. You are too beautiful—and I love you too much. I thought at first it would be the best thing for you. I did not want to burden you any longer with my troubles. I've caused you so much unhappiness already, but now—"

"Hush . . ."

She came to him, and placed one finger upon his lips. "Not another word . . . I won't listen to you when you feel sorry for yourself. For we are together now, and so we shall always be."

Their naked bodies were still slippery and cold with rain as they embraced, but very soon they found warmth and comfort in each other's arms. Gerard spread a soft woolen blanket over the mounds of hay and pulled another over them as a coverlet. There, in that strange, improvised nest, they began to thaw out, and as they snuggled together a new fire began to blaze between them.

"Dearest love," whispered Gerard and found her mouth, saluting her with his tongue.

"Dearest man," Coral sighed, when she could speak again, shuddering deliciously as his reckless kisses traveled down her neck, across her breasts. His lips upon her nipples, nuzzling and teasing . . . and then further yet, over her silken flanks to the magical tenderness of her thighs, and the innermost recesses of her womanhood . . .

Now they were no longer cold or miserable, but warm and full of life, with eager anticipation in their movements, while their bodies responded to one another, met and mingled.

Coral felt herself melting under his caresses. All her anxieties seemed to fade away, and she let her whole being unfold to him—every nerve, every mus-

cle fully relaxed, a sweet, moist warmth spreading through her, ready to meet his desires.

Now he began to move again. He tickled her navel with the tip of his tongue, then lifted his head still higher, exciting her breasts with the electric touch of his lips and the playful nipping of his teeth. She let herself relax completely—abandoning her body to his demands, and as his mouth came to join hers, she knew that his urgent loins were between her thighs, and his driving thrusts were already upon her—with-in her.

Such a bewildering series of sensations made her dizzy. The nerve ends in her skin tingled at his touch, as his hands and lips played upon her body, and at her soul's core his rigid maleness plunged and plunged again, filling her with unutterable delight. At the same time, she clasped his shoulders, feeling the play of his strong muscles beneath her fingers, and in her ears she heard the rhythmic pounding of their mutual urgency. She was aware of the horses shifting in their stalls, the occasional clatter of a hoof upon the stone floor, the crunching of hay beneath the blanket. . . . And she smelled the sweetness of the hay, the powerful tang of horseflesh, and mingled with both these odors the unique scent of a man's body—a man's essence.

That night marked the end of one chapter in their life together; all pretense and doubt at an end, they admitted their deep need for one another and so progressed, entering the next stage of their marriage in total trust and total fulfillment.

She gave a little wordless cry and gripped him tightly, her body shaken again and again by spasms of ecstasy. . . . In the same instant the life force within him reached a climax so profound and wonderful that he could only catch his breath and sob, as if his heart would break with joy. So they came together, becoming one spirit and one flesh, in the act of love.

During the night the rain passed off and the drenched earth exhaled a thick white fog that shrouded the house and the park. Within a matter of hours, summer had gone and winter seemed ready to take its place.

After breakfast, Gerard took refuge in the old schoolroom, gazing out at the ghostly gray landscape where the specters of trees and hedges appeared to float in a misty sea. He felt a faint draught upon the back of his neck as the door opened quietly behind him.

"Hello, Gerard," said Garnet, coming in to the room. "I am very glad to have found you alone. I want to ask you a question."

He did not turn around, but stared blindly out at the view as he replied, "No doubt it is the same question Coral put to me last night. And for what it is worth, the answer is no . . . I did not kill Cassandra Mayne."

"That is not my question at all," said Garnet. "I never believed you to be capable of such a thing. My question is this—was Cassandra blackmailing you, Gerard?"

Now he moved at last, swinging round abruptly. "What do you mean?" he began, on the defensive at once.

"I mean exactly what I say. Was she blackmailing you as well?"

"Why do you say 'as well'?" He picked this up immediately. "Had she got her claws into someone else?"

"Oh, yes. Several people, I suspect—Brock for one, and Captain Blades for another. That is why it occurred to me that perhaps you too might—"

But Gerard was hardly listening. Something in her reply had given him food for thought.

"So *that's* it! Captain Blades! Of course, why didn't I think of that? No wonder he asked—"

Then he realized Garnet was listening, and he stopped short.

"Yes, go on. What were you saying about Dicky?" she pressed him.

"Nothing. It's of no importance. I was thinking aloud. . . ." Gerard rubbed the bridge of his nose, thinking fast. "So Miss Mayne made a habit of extorting money by threats, did she? That's very interesting."

"And what I am asking you, Gerard, is whether you were one of her victims."

He crossed to the small wooden desk, and wriggled onto the narrow bench, like an overgrown schoolboy.

"Mind your own business," he said, with a flash of schoolboy impudence.

"Oh, don't be so stupid!" Garnet retorted—and suddenly they were children again, engaged in a brother-and-sister squabble. "Don't you understand? We have to tell the truth to one another. . . . The more we can piece together about Cassie's schemes, the more likely we are to find out who else might have had reason to wish her dead."

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you," he persisted doggedly.

She flung herself down upon her knees beside the desk, looking up at him pleadingly. "Dear Gerard, please trust me. . . . We must all trust one another. It's the only way."

But she was interrupted by a knock at the door, and a moment later Coral joined them. She held herself very erect and clasped her hands tightly so that they might not see her shaking, but her complexion was as pale as death.

"What is it, my love?" Gerard asked. "What's the matter?"

"There is a visitor—a gentleman to see you," Coral answered. "A Mr. Fothergill."

She stood aside and held the door open for the newcomer.

Mr. Fothergill was a very suave gentleman, with a

balding head and cheeks so well-shaved they appeared to be as smooth and polished as a rosy apple. The blandness of his expression was broken only by two very black, bushy eyebrows which rose and fell as he spoke, with alarming rapidity.

"Mr. Mallory? Allow me to introduce myself—Jerome Fothergill, village schoolmaster, and for my sins the present holder of the official title of parish constable. As you may imagine, I am here in connection with the death of Miss Cassandra Mayne, since I am empowered by the justices to make a full and exhaustive investigation of the case."

"I am pleased to meet you, sir," said Gerard evenly. "My wife, Coral, you have already met, obviously. And this is my sister; the mistress of the house, Lady Savage."

"Charmed, ma'am, charmed indeed." Mr. Fothergill bowed to each lady in turn, then continued, "I have a few questions to put to you, Mr. Mallory. The ladies are at liberty to stay if they wish. I do not believe in conducting these inquiries in a hole-and-corner manner. Pray be seated, your ladyship, and you too, Mrs. Mallory."

They found themselves taking their places beside Gerard on the schoolroom bench, while Mr. Fothergill paced the floor slowly and deliberately, framing his first question. Suddenly he turned and shot out an arm, pointing an accusing forefinger.

"Tell me this, Mr. Mallory. When were you in Ireland, I should like to know?"

Gerard caught Coral's eye and shifted uncomfortably.

"Oh, a few years ago now. I don't remember the exact dates . . ."

"According to the information you gave Constable Fenner, you passed through Ireland en route from Spain to America—which seems to be a remarkable detour, if I may say so?"

Gerard shrugged and answered, "In the army one obeys orders. One does not question them."

"No doubt. . . . And when did you resign your commission in the army, Mr. Mallory?"

The question took Gerard by surprise, and he stammered, "Oh, I—I think—it must have been last winter . . . yes, that's right—about the time of the Battle of New Orleans . . ."

"Indeed? And do you have the appropriate documents to attest to your discharge?"

Gerard felt himself flushing, and replied irritably, "Not to hand, sir, no. I have put my papers away somewhere. They are temporarily mislaid."

"Mislaid accidentally, or by design? I suggest to you, Mr. Mallory, that you have deliberately mislaid your documents, as you deliberately misled the worthy constable when he interrogated you. . . . I suggest that you are giving us false information."

"I have nothing more to say," said Gerard stubbornly. "I am not a child to be bullied by a schoolmaster, as you seem to imagine."

"No, sir, you are a suspect, required to give evidence in a case of murder, and I must insist that you cooperate with me."

"I have nothing further to add which can possibly assist you, Mr. Fothergill."

"You must permit me to be the best judge of that, sir. If you won't talk to me, I must hand you over to those who can demand that you give them correct answers. You will kindly get your coat and accompany me to Guildford, to appear before the justices."

"You're not arresting him?" Coral burst out indignantly.

"I have no choice, ma'am. Come, sir, do not keep me waiting."

Gerard turned to his wife and embraced her in silence—one long, heartfelt kiss, and then he departed with the parish constable. There was no knowing when they would meet again.

As soon as the door closed, Coral turned to Garnet, and the tears were bright in her eyes, but she was determined not to cry.

"Is that your English way?" she asked fiercely. "To submit without putting up a fight? To be too proud to defend yourself? Is that what the English teach their children?"

"Coral, do not think of me as an enemy. I would like so much to be able to help you, if only—"

"Do not trouble yourself. I don't need your help. . . . Help *him* if you can, for he's your brother—and he's an innocent man."

"I know it," said Garnet gently. "And that is why you and I must patch up our differences and become friends, for it is the only way we can hope to assist Gerard."

"How can you say that? How can you offer me friendship when you despise and detest me—and don't bother to deny it, for I've been told it by one who knows you well!" She faltered and bit her lip.

"By one who knew me, rather. Isn't that what you meant to say?" Garnet corrected her sadly. "For I was told by the same lady how sullen and ungracious you were, and how bitterly you resented me. Don't you think Cassie has caused enough illwill between us already?"

There was a pause. They stood face to face, anxious to bridge the gulf that separated them, but still a little on guard.

"Can it really be—was she deliberately setting us against one another?" Coral asked.

"Let's say that we have both been very foolish, to let ourselves be so easily influenced," said Garnet. "And let us, for heaven's sake, have no more of such nonsense. For *Gerard's* sake, rather—let us be friends."

Coral looked into Garnet's eyes and saw her for the first time as she really was—and she liked what she saw.

NEW MOON

"I've misjudged you," she said frankly and took both Garnet's hands in her own. "Forgive me, and let's begin again."

"With all my heart." Garnet smiled, and impulsively put her arms around her sister-in-law's waist, and hugged her. "Now, let us waste no more time!"

They sat down at the little wooden desk and tried to get their muddled thoughts into some sort of order. Gerard was innocent—that was the only thing they knew for certain. Coral confided the whole story of the scandal in Dublin, when Gerard had had to leave the country in a great hurry, since he had been unjustly accused of killing a pimp in a drunken brawl.

". . . So you see, it's desperately important that they should not check his story too closely. Otherwise the police will declare him guilty of both murders!" she concluded.

"Yes, of course. I see that now . . ." With her forefinger, Garnet traced the initials that her brother had carved upon the desk lid.

"The worst of it is, he hasn't told them the whole truth about Cassandra Mayne either," Coral added. "For one thing, he lied about where he was at the time she was killed. He said he was with me, only I know he wasn't. He wouldn't tell me what happened, just that he was on his way to find her, when he was stopped by someone else. . . . He's trying to protect this other person, and I don't understand why."

Garnet frowned, recalling the conversation she had had with her brother, a little earlier.

"I wonder. Could it have something to do with Dicky?" she suggested. "For Gerard mentioned Dicky when he spoke to me, and then he did his best to change the subject, as if he had something to hide."

"Can't we ask Captain Blades what he knows?" said Coral. "I suppose he may refuse to tell us, but it's worth trying, surely?"

"Anything's worth trying," said Garnet and added with a hint of a smile, "I don't think, somehow, that

Captain Richard Blades will try to hide anything from *me!*"

They found the gallant Captain in the library, idly turning the pages of the latest newspaper from London.

"Disgusting weather, ain't it?" he said gloomily. "I must say, I wish I could be on my way home to Kenilworth. Not that I'm ungrateful for your kind hospitality, Garnet, old chap—your ladyship—but the family will be fretting, and Penelope will be wondering what the deuce has become of me . . ."

"Is it the fog that prevents you from traveling, Captain?" asked Coral.

"No. I'd be prepared to put up with any amount of fog. It's that confounded blockhead Constable Fennel! He told me not to attempt to leave until this case was solved, and he then informed me that it might take several months!"

"Not as long as that, Dicky, I hope." said Garnet soothingly. "At least, not if we all put our heads together and try to solve the puzzle between us. That is why we have come to find you."

"Me? Why?" Dicky looked from one girl to the other, suspiciously. "It's no good asking me. I don't know anything."

"Oh, but I'm sure you do, Captain dear," cooed Coral, very sweetly. "We've come to persuade you to tell us all your secrets!"

They were on either side of him, and he suddenly felt very vulnerable—between two such beautiful young women, both intent upon discovering the truth. What hope did he have?

"What do you want to know?" he asked cautiously.

"Only this, Dicky darling," said Garnet. "Where were you at the time of Cassandra's death? Come now, be honest."

"I was—well, I was in the stableyard. I heard the shot, and then that young servant of yours came running in, saying she was dead, and—"

"No, no, before that. Because we know now that she must have been drowned some time earlier. Where were you in the half-hour before you heard the gunshot—and who was with you?"

Dicky wrinkled his brow, and replied, "I was talking to your husband, Mrs. Mallory."

"To Gerard? Then you were right, Garnet. Captain Blades is the answer to that little mystery. But why wouldn't Gerard tell me so? Why did he try to keep it a secret?"

Now Dicky looked distinctly uncomfortable, but he had to go on with his confession.

"Because I'd sworn him to secrecy. I made him give me his word as an officer and a gentleman not to tell a living soul what I was about to ask him. It's damned embarrassing to admit it, but the fact is—I was in financial straits, you see. I—I'd lost all my money. Well, you know about *that* sorry business, Garnet, and I needed to borrow some cash to get me home to Kenilworth. . . . It was all mixed up with Miss Mayne, unfortunately. I was in the devil of a pickle."

"But Gerard has no money," Coral began.

"I know that now. He told me so himself, though I'm afraid I didn't altogether believe him at first. That's what took so long—we had quite a little argument about it. I offered to repay him with interest—usual terms and all that—but he kept saying he couldn't help me."

"Never mind the money. You can help each other now. And on a matter that is far more important!" Garnet interrupted, her eyes sparkling. "Don't you see? You can swear to the fact that you were walking and talking together all that time. Go to the Justices in Guildford, and tell them so. Then they will be forced to release Gerard immediately, for your evidence clears you both of all suspicion. . . . Neither of you could possibly have committed the murder!"

It took a few minutes to convince Dicky of this, but

ROSEWOOD

at last he allowed himself to be persuaded, and the two girls packed him off on the fastest horse in the Rosewood stables, to go to Gerard's rescue.

"Thank heaven!" Coral breathed a sigh of relief as he galloped off down the drive. They stood on the front steps, watching him disappear into the swirling fog, and she continued, "At least we know for certain that Gerard is innocent—and Captain Blades—and Sir Broccard. And I know *I* didn't kill Cassandra Mayne—and I don't suppose that *you* did, either." She paused, and added as an afterthought, "You didn't—did you?"

There was a moment of silence, and she turned to find her sister-in-law gazing into the distance, with a very strange expression upon her face. At last Garnet shook her head.

"No, I didn't do it. . . . But I've suddenly realized—I know who did!"

Chapter Four

IN BONDAGE

Garnet would say no more; she simply told Coral that she knew now what she must do.

"Be patient. . . . Gerard is safe, and soon the whole nightmare will be over. But I must deal with this in my own way."

She left Coral, completely bewildered, in the old schoolroom and went downstairs. There she took a warm cloak from the hall and threw it around her shoulders, then set off into the gardens, still shrouded in cold, clammy fog.

She listened carefully, trying to detect the sound of a child's voice—a child's laughter, but the heavy white mists seemed to blot out every noise. This was the time of day, she knew, when he was accustomed to walk in the garden. Perhaps he would be playing at hide-and-seek in the old summerhouse.

He had to be here somewhere. It should be a simple matter to find him, and when she did—the dreadful mystery would be solved at last. That was why she had to look for her nephew—for little Blaise Mal-lory . . .

She passed over the wet lawns like a phantom, moving among unreal shapes that loomed up from the fog and disappeared into it again. A stone urn disfigured with damp green moss; a spindly willow tree, shedding the last of its slender yellow leaves in a slow, mournful shower, like tears. She reached the summerhouse, pushed open the door—but there was no one there.

ROSEWOOD

She would have to continue her search.

Perhaps he had gone to the stables. She remembered how Blaise loved to visit the horses in their stables, and so altered her course, heading back toward the house.

A dead branch cracked and fell with a harsh sound that startled her, and she felt her heart beating faster. She would not give up now; she had to find him.

Then, as she approached the tall gray walls of Rosewood, its rows of blank windows like sightless eyes staring at nothing, a flash of light caught her attention. She looked up, and froze.

Someone was in one of the upstairs rooms, lighting a candle.

The morning was so bleak and dark that the faint yellow glimmer seemed to stand out with special clarity, as if demanding to be noticed. She knew which room it was in. She didn't have to stop and think about it, for it had been her own bedroom for so many years, before she first left home. And more recently it had been Cassie's room . . .

Now it was empty—or it should be.

Quickly, she made up her mind, and retraced her steps. Suddenly she felt certain that she would find what she sought, there in Cassie's bedroom.

She met no one on the way upstairs, and when she reached the bedroom door her heart was pounding. But she could not turn back at this point; she had to go on, to the very end.

She walked in, shutting the door firmly behind her. "Hello, Jem . . ."

Jem Bolt was on his knees beside the bed, holding the lighted candle, for the room was very murky, and he had had difficulty finding what he wanted—half a dozen lengths of cord that had been hidden beneath the bed, unnoticed by the maids when they came to clean the room. Now he stood up, tangling the cords together.

NEW MOON

"What do you want, Miss Garnet—your ladyship?" he asked gruffly.

"I was about to ask you the same question, Jem. I have been looking for Master Blaise, because I know that you generally take him for a walk at this time of day, and I hoped I would find you together."

"Not today. Blaise is down in the kitchen, with some of the girls taking care of him. . . . I'd other things to do, this morning."

"So it seems. But what are you doing in this room, Jem? You have no business to be here."

"I came to get—some things as were left behind . . ." He stuffed the handful of cords into the deep pocket of his footman's livery and faced her defiantly. "Just some odds and ends that Miss Mayne left here. . . . A keepsake of the lady, you might say."

"You admired her a great deal, didn't you?" Garnet asked.

"I don't know 'bout that. . . . She was—different. I never met no one else like her. There'll never be another—not like Miss Mayne . . ."

"And you were very unhappy when she died," Garnet continued.

"That I was. I—I missed her so much, you see. . . . I still do miss her." His voice rasped, hoarse with emotion.

"I understand that, for I was very fascinated by her myself." Garnet moved closer to the bed and Jem backed away slightly. "But what I do not understand is—if you cared for her so deeply, why did you kill her, Jem?"

There was a stillness in the room that seemed as if it would last forever. The air between them hung as heavy as the fog beyond the window panes. Neither of them moved; only the candlestick in Jem's left hand trembled a little.

At last he set it down carefully upon the bedside table, and muttered, "I don't know what you mean. . . . I done nothing to hurt her."

"Oh, yes, you did. You drowned her, Jem. We both know that."

He would not look at her. It was a trick, a trap to catch him. He must not say or do anything that would give him away.

But how could Miss Garnet know about it? How could she be so sure what had happened that last afternoon by the fishpond? She wasn't there. Nobody was there—he'd made sure of that. Nobody but himself and Cassandra Mayne.

She was already undressing when he reached the pond.

It was hot, the last hot afternoon before the weather broke, and she was enjoying the gentle breeze that played upon her bare skin. He stood unseen for a while, in the shade of the alder tree, and she had her back to him. He watched as she folded her clothes carefully—she was always neat and precise in all her actions—then laid them in a little pile below the willow brake. She unfastened her last garment, the long, plain shift she always wore beneath her dress, and slowly slipped the ribbons from her shoulders.

He saw her gradually slipping it down. He marveled at the long, straight line of her slim back, and the twin curves of her rounded hips, her shapely, elegant legs. . . . He remembered the feel of those legs, soft as silk, yet sinewy as whiplcord when they had been wrapped tightly about his own sturdy thighs—and at the thought of it, the familiar pressure began to build up in his loins.

Slowly, without the least self-consciousness, Cassie stepped out of her shift and turned toward the fishpond. At once she saw Jem standing there in the shadows, and a momentary spark of anger crossed her face. But then she smiled and acknowledged him.

"So it's you. . . . Have you come to play Peeping Tom?" she asked.

Her breasts were full and firm, with the sepia nipples he loved to touch and the unique crimson stigma

NEW MOON

below. As she spoke, she undid the knot of golden hair upon her head and shook it free, letting it tumble about her shoulders, and the shimmer of those blonde tresses was echoed by the sheen of her body hair.

He could not speak. He could only stare at her, dumbly. He knew what he had to do now.

"Well, I am going to take a dip in the pool, to refresh myself. . . . Why don't you join me?" she added, teasingly.

He nodded. It was going to be so easy, after all.

While she walked down the bank and ventured into the cool water, he began to take off his clothes. Carefully now—there was no need to hurry. Shirt, breeches, stockings and boots, he divested himself of everything he wore, placing his garments in a second heap next to Cassie's. And all the while he watched her as she splashed joyfully in the pond, her long legs outstretched, her breasts shining and silvered above the surface as she floated upon her back.

"Come on in—it's heavenly!" she called to him.

He needed no second bidding. Purposefully, he followed her into the water. She saw that his male organ was erect and excited and she laughed at him.

"You're insatiable, Jem Bolt! You look like a sea monster, a rampaging Neptune on the prowl for a pretty mermaid!"

She swam forward to meet him in the water, and playfully threw her arms around him. She was still laughing when he grasped her by the throat and pushed her down—down—below the surface. It did not take long; he exerted every ounce of his strength to hold her there, watching the bubbles that escaped from her nose and mouth, seeing the water whipped up to a white foam as she kicked and struggled in vain.

At last it was all over, and she was motionless. The pond lay still once more, and he began to drag her inert body back to the grassy bank.

He left her there—as if she were basking in the au-

turn sunlight, her eyes closed, her gorgeous body proudly displayed. . . . And it was not until he had begun to pull on his clothes again that he realized he was crying.

" . . . I had to do it, Miss Garnet. I *had* to—d'ye see?"

"But why?" Garnet wanted to know. "If you loved her so much, what possessed you to do such a thing?"

"*I never said I loved her!*"

Now he turned to face Garnet, his hands still deep in his pockets, his eyes ablaze with passion.

"It weren't love. . . . 'Twas something else—something strange. *She* possessed me, if you like. You said yourself she were very—fascinating. She made me do things. She made me tell her things. . . . She twisted my soul inside out, Miss Garnet, till I couldn't help myself . . ."

Then he frowned, his face darkening.

"But—how did you find me out? You weren't there when I did it. How did you know what happened?"

"It wasn't so very difficult," Garnet told him. "As soon as I stopped to think about it clearly, it was quite obvious."

He stared at her, trying to make sense of her remarks, while she continued.

"I remembered what Gerard had said to me. He was in the stableyard with Captain Blades when they heard the shot, and a few moments later, when the echoes had only just died away, you came running in, saying, 'She's dead.' When I thought about it, I realized you could not possibly have run all the way from the fishpond to the stables in so short a time, so you must already have known that she was dead *before* the shot was fired."

Dimly, Jem began to understand.

"I was going to own up, see. I come back to the house to tell what I'd done—and then . . . all of a sudden there was that gun a-going off, and people running. Everybody saying as how she'd been shot—

so I didn't say nothing. I kept my mouth shut, like . . ."

"But now that the truth is out, Jem, you must confess. You must go to the constables and tell them everything—"

"No, Miss Garnet . . . I ain't a-going to tell them, and neither are you."

As he spoke, he drew his right hand out of his pocket and Garnet saw that he was holding Brock's pistol.

"It is loaded, Miss Garnet," he said, pointing the muzzle toward her.

"You would not shoot me," she said, keeping her voice low and steady. "You could not do it, Jem."

"I tried to kill that fancy gentleman of yours, that captain," Jem retorted. "I knew as how you'd gone to his room. I watched you go—and I went out into the garden, and waited. 'Twas all dark, and then I saw the candle being lit, so I threw gravel at the window, and as soon as he drew back the curtains, I pulled the trigger. Only I missed—he was too far away, and I ain't had much practice with firearms and such like."

He leveled the pistol at Garnet's breast, and added, "I wouldn't miss again, not at this range."

Garnet took a long breath, feeling her pulse racing but struggling to remain calm and reassuring.

"You were mistaken, Jem, if you thought that I was making love with Captain Blades. . . . I went to his room to discuss the police inquiry. I hoped he might provide some new evidence that would help us to identify the murderer. . . . At that time, I did not know you were guilty."

"And now you do know, what be you a-going to do about it, missy?"

"I shall do nothing, but I shall expect you to make a full confession to the justices. You will tell them what you have done—and why you did it."

"No! Not that—I can't never tell that to nobody!"

ROSEWOOD

She looked into his face, seeking some sort of explanation, for the words that sprang from his lips had a note of genuine despair.

"Why not? What was it she did to you, Jem?" she asked softly. "Was it so very terrible?"

"It weren't what she did. 'Twas what she were going to do—to you . . ."

"To *me*?" Garnet stared at him, completely at a loss.

"I can tell you now, missy, 'cos you do know part of it already . . . the secret part."

"I don't understand what you are saying. What secret?"

"Like I said, Miss Cassie, she used to make me tell her things. And one time I did tell her more than I meant. I—I started to say something 'bout you an' me . . . going together. That time in America."

He dropped his eyes, sweating with shame at the memory.

He recalled how Cassie had laughed with delight when he let slip Garnet's name; how she had reveled in this unexpected nugget of information—here, in this very room . . .

It was the last time they had been in bed together.

He had come to her, begging for the treatment that only she could give to him, pleading for punishment—and she had been graciously pleased to administer it.

He was lying face down upon the sheets, with his ankles shackled tightly and his wrists tied behind his head. Upon this occasion, he was completely naked, for she had commenced her domination over him by stripping him, bit by bit, accompanying each stage with some fresh taunt or jibe. When he was totally defenseless, she had tied him up and begun to question him about the rest of the household—about the other servants—about the family, above all about the master and mistress of Rosewood.

That was when, by a clumsy slip of the tongue,

he had first betrayed the secret of his association with Garnet.

He would have given anything to retract what he had said, but the truth was out. Cassie was on to it immediately, and she would not give him a moment's peace until she had dragged the whole story out of him.

"Where did it happen? When? How long ago? How many times? Did you seduce her—how did it begin? Did you tear off her dress? Did you see her naked? Tell me everything, do you hear—*everything!*"

He clenched his teeth and would not answer.

"So you are going to be stubborn. You, who are my slave. Don't you know yet that you have to submit to me at all times? *You will obey me!*" She spat out the words venomously. "And I shall make you suffer for your insolence . . ."

She put her hand beneath the pillows and took out a supple hazel switch—a springy, pliant shoot that she had plucked from the hedgerow earlier for just such a purpose.

Now she began to use it upon Jem's body, bringing it down across his hips again and again. He buried his face in the pillows, determined not to make any sound, hearing the stick whistle through the air and flinching at each searing blow that cut into him like a knife blade. . . . This was punishment indeed.

She concentrated upon his buttocks, beating him with merciless ferocity and watching with satisfaction as his skin reddened and glowed under the ceaseless flagellation. His body began to jerk about pitifully, convulsing at every stroke. Soon his flesh was almost raw, and still she flayed him with all the power she could muster.

"No—no," he gasped, unable to endure any more. "Stop—please, miss, let me be—"

To his amazement, she seemed to relent at this. The beating stopped, and instead she only flicked his tender cheeks with the tip of the hazel wand—very,

very lightly—but even this slight pressure made him writhe in torment.

And yet, it was not entirely torment . . . for now another emotion had overtaken the pain, and Jem Bolt discovered that—incredible as it seemed—he was violently excited. His genitals were tight and hard, so that he felt as if he would explode, while a consuming fever raged within his loins.

"Is *that* what you want—is it?" breathed Cassie.

She let the tip of the switch trail between his buttocks, delicately brushing the most sensitive area of all, between his thighs, touching—tickling—torturing . . .

He was in such a state of sexual frenzy that he could scarcely contain himself, and she played upon his condition with skillful cunning. Time and again, she titillated and stimulated him to new heights of desire, and then suddenly replaced the sensual touch with another cruel, stinging stroke, when he least expected it.

She kept up this game for what seemed like an eternity, leading him on remorselessly from one new threshold of pain to the next, opening up vistas of ecstatic sensation that he had never even imagined.

At last he rolled on to his side with his manhood straining and throbbing, aware that he could not withstand the agonizing pressure a moment longer and begging for release.

"You must—take me—now," he panted. "I can't bear it no more. Now—please *now!*"

"Will you tell me what you did to Garnet?" whispered Cassie, bringing her face down so close that he could feel her breath warm upon his belly. "Will you tell me everything?"

"I . . . I raped her," groaned Jem. And as Cassie's wet mouth closed upon him and brought him to final satisfaction, he knew with bitter disgust that he had betrayed the one person he really cared for.

It was only afterward, when Cassie had released

him from his bondage and they lay together in the sad, aching aftermath, that she began to tease him again.

"That was very amusing indeed," she purred. "A most illuminating revelation. I wonder how much Garnet would be prepared to pay me, to prevent me telling Sir Broccard what I have learned . . ."

She may have been joking. She may never have intended to carry out this threat, but now no one would ever know, for it was at this moment that Jem Bolt realized he had no choice.

" . . . She had to die," he repeated. "There weren't no other way."

"I see," said Garnet gently. "Poor Cassie. She tried to use everybody in the end."

"I couldn't let her do that, not to you," Jem repeated. "It were wrong of me to do what I did in America—and it were wrong of me to tell her about it, but I knew then I had to put a stop to things, once and for all. . . . D'you understand that?"

Garnet nodded slowly.

"I think so. You did what you believed to be right—and now you must take the consequences, Jem. I think you know that too, don't you, in your heart of hearts?"

Their eyes met. He said flatly, "And if I won't do it? If I won't never confess?"

"Then I must."

His finger tightened just a little upon the trigger, but she held his gaze.

"No, Jem. You have done so much already for my sake. . . . Give me the gun."

She stretched out her hand. A few seconds ticked away in the little bedroom, and neither of them moved. Then, very slowly and regretfully, he held out the pistol and gave it to her.

"Here, take it. . . . And now tell me what 'tis I do have to do."

"Thank you, Jem." She tried to smile but found

ROSEWOOD

that her eyes were wet with tears. "I will go with you to find the Constable. It won't be so difficult, will it, if I am there? . . . Come—we shall face him together."

She took his hand, and held it for a moment, looking up into his face. Then she blew out the candle, and they left the room.

Chapter Five

THE LAST ROSE

Once the justices accepted the sworn statements of Mr. Gerard Mallory and Captain Richard Blades, they had to let both gentlemen go. Dicky returned to Rosewood on Quicksilver, the dapple gray that Garnet had lent him to make the journey into Guildford, but Gerard was brought home in style, accompanied by Constables Fothergill and Fenner, in a hackney carriage.

"I appreciate your courtesy, gentlemen, in keeping me company upon the drive," said Gerard dryly, as they bowled up the gravel sweep of Rosewood Hall. "But I feel I am imposing upon your valuable time. I could quite well have traveled back on my own."

"We have our duties to perform, sir," remarked the schoolmaster, looking out the coach window. "For although one line of inquiry appears to have come to an end, the investigation must still continue."

"Explore every avenue," the blacksmith echoed his sentiments. "No stone unturned. That's the way of it, Master Gerard."

"We shall not give up until we have nailed the villain, however long that may take," affirmed Constable Fothergill.

The carriage drew up, and as the passengers alighted they found Dicky Blades already there before them, the reins of the dapple gray in his hands.

"I made good time on the homeward trip," he told Gerard. "This Quicksilver must have wings on her hooves. She should be renamed Pegasus!"

Constable Fothergill paid off the coach driver and sent him on his way, then announced that he would proceed with the next stage of his inquiry by questioning all the servants.

"I think we may save you that trouble, Constable," said Garnet's voice.

Looking up, the men saw that she was waiting for them atop the stone steps that led up to the front door. At her side was Jem Bolt.

"Jem has something to tell you," she continued.

Jem looked at her once more. She nodded her head gently, and this seemed to give him the encouragement he needed. With a hangdog slouch, he began to descend the steps.

"Sir . . . I do want to give myself up . . . for the killing of Miss Cassandra. I done it, and I'm ready to take the consequences."

Within the house, Brock entered the schoolroom and found a happy family scene in progress. Coral was kneeling on the floor, playing nursery games with Blaise and Ivory.

"Ring a ring of roses, a pocket full of posies," she began, and Blaise finished cheerfully:

"Atishoo, atishoo—all fall down . . . !"

With a whoop of joy, he rolled over on his back, and Coral, holding Ivory in her lap, pretended to fall down too, making the baby gurgle and crow with delight.

"I'm sorry, Sir Broccard. Have we been making too much noise? Are we disturbing you?" she asked, seeing a faint shadow of anxiety upon his face.

"No, not in the least. I heard the children, and I thought my wife might be with you. Do you know where she is?"

"I'm sorry, I can't tell you. She went out some while ago, to look for somebody. I don't know who it was. She told me she had some business to take care of, and she had to do it alone."

NEW MOON

"I see . . . and you are taking care of our daughter while Garnet is occupied? That is kind of you, ma'am."

"It's not kind at all! I enjoy being with the children, and they are so good when they are together. You see what friends they have become in these past weeks."

"Yes, indeed, I hope that—in time—you yourself may find you have become a friend to our household, Mrs. Mallory. For you know you are a part of our family."

Coral looked up at him and said, "Thank you. You have done all you could to help me feel at ease, Sir Broccard, and today, I think Garnet and I have learned a lesson from the children at last. I hope we are going to become friends."

"I shall welcome that with all my heart," said Brock warmly. "For it will enable us to drop this absurd formality, and allow me to call you Coral, as I have always wished to do."

"I shall be honored—Brock," she said with a smile.

Then she scrambled to her feet, eagerly, looking past him at the open doorway.

"Gerard! Mother of God, you're back at last!"

Gerard walked into the schoolroom, and Blaise flung himself upon him, clutching him around the knees.

"Papa, Papa, come and play with us!"

Gerard met Coral's eyes, and they exchanged a look of love and understanding. Then he picked the child up and swung him into the air.

"Yes, my son. The schoolmaster has let me out, and it's playtime at last."

Coral kissed her husband fondly, and then busied herself with Ivory, settling her into a little cradle by the window, while Brock welcomed Gerard and congratulated him upon his speedy return.

"The constables have come to their senses then and

let you go? You're no longer under suspicion?" he asked.

"What's a spishun, Papa?" chimed in Blaise, looking from one serious face to the other.

"Come here, Blaise, and help me to make Ivory comfortable. It's time for her nap—you must sing her the lullaby I taught you," said Coral.

While the little boy sang "Hush-a-bye, baby" in a clear, piping treble, the two men discussed the situation in low tones.

"There will be no more suspicion now, for the case is as good as closed," Gerard replied. "Here—Garnet asked me to give you this."

He pulled the missing pistol from his pocket and handed it over. Brock stared at it, then demanded, "Where did it come from? Who had taken it?"

"Jem Bolt. . . . He must have stolen it from your room when no one was about, but he gave it back to Garnet when she persuaded him to make a clean breast of his crimes to the justices."

"Jem Bolt—killed that woman?" Brock frowned.

"He did. It was motivated by passion, I fancy. Anyhow—he's with the constables now, telling them the whole truth."

At the window, Coral was saying, "Look, Blaise, there's a break in the clouds. Perhaps the weather will clear up this afternoon. . . . I believe the fog is lifting at last."

In the coachhouse, Constable Fothergill laid down his pen and read out what he had written.

"I, James Bolt, being of sound mind, do hereby swear and confess that I did unlawfully lay hands upon the person of Cassandra Mayne, and take her life by drowning in the fishpond at Rosewood Hall. I understand what I did, and I am prepared to pay the penalty for my actions. Given under my hand this day—"

Fothergill broke off, passing the quill pen to Jem.

"And that's where you sign your name—here at the bottom of the page."

Jem took the pen and looked around uncertainly at Garnet, who was standing at his elbow.

"I don't—I can't—I ain't much of a hand at lettering," he stammered.

"Can he make his mark instead?" Garnet asked.

"Very well. Put down a cross, lad, that will suffice."

So, with laborious care, Jem made two strokes of the pen, and the deed was done.

"Now we'll drive you back to the courthouse and you'll be taken in custody till the justices can hear the case," Fothergill added.

"Now? What about my Ma? I did ought to tell her I'm a-going," said Jem.

"This won't take long. I'll go and fetch Mrs. Bolt," Garnet added. "Give me a moment to break the news to her first, so that they may say goodbye."

Constable Fothergill frowned impatiently.

"If you wish . . . but please be as quick as you can, Lady Savage, for we can't afford to waste any more time. I must go back and report to the authorities as soon as possible."

"Will there be a reward?" asked Constable Fenner hopefully.

Garnet found Mrs. Bolt in the buttery. She had been baking cakes, and her plump hands were white with flour. As Garnet began to explain as best she could, the elderly housekeeper pushed a wisp of gray hair back from her brow, leaving a floury smear upon her forehead.

"But what has the boy done?" she asked plaintively. "Has he been up to his mischief again?"

"It's more serious than that, I'm afraid," said Garnet. "You see—he has confessed to . . . to murder."

Mrs. Bolt's expression did not change. Red-faced, flustered, she dabbed at her hair again, then said, "No, miss—your ladyship—no, he's never done

that. . . . He's a good boy at heart. He'd never do such a thing, not my Jem . . ."

"He's admitted it. He was with Miss Mayne at the fishpond when—"

"He might have been up to his tricks with the young woman, I'm not denying that. He can be a proper little rascal with the ladies sometimes. He takes after his Dad. Poor Mr. Bolt was just the same, never could resist a pretty ankle, but he'd never do nothing *wrong*. Not my Jem. There must be some mistake."

Garnet despaired of ever making Mrs. Bolt understand or accept the truth, and simply said, "In any case, they're taking him to Guildford, to appear before the justices, and he wants to say goodbye to you before he goes."

"Yes, yes, I'm coming, but I tell you it's nothing to worry about. . . . He'll be home again soon enough, you'll see. It's all a mistake!"

Garnet followed as the bustling little woman led the way out to the stableyard, as homely and straightforward as the cottage loaf that her figure so much resembled. Emerging from the door of the servants' hall, they saw Jem, escorted on either side by the two constables. Beyond them, one of the grooms was beginning to unsaddle the dapple gray, before returning her to her loose box. Mrs. Bolt gave a little cry at seeing her son in the hands of the law.

"No, no, it's all wrong, officer. You've got the wrong man—my Jem's a good boy."

The two constables looked up at this interruption, momentarily distracted.

It was all Jem needed. In one bound, he had wriggled free of Constable Fenner's restraining hand and leaped for Quicksilver's saddle. The groom tried to stop him but got the heel of Jem's boot in his chest and a kick that sent him sprawling upon the cobblestones.

"Stop! Stop, in the name of the law!" shouted Fothergill, but it was too late.

Digging his toes into the stirrups, Jem gave the beast a whack on the rump, and it broke into a gallop. Fenner made a plucky attempt to grab the reins, but horse and rider thundered past him in a deafening volley of hoofbeats—out through the archway and away like the wind.

Jem had lived up to his reputation and his name. He had "bolted" once again, and for the very last time.

"You plaguey blockhead!" Fothergill turned on Constable Fenner in a rage. "You let him go. There'll be no reward for this!"

Only Mrs. Bolt seemed unperturbed.

"I must get back to my baking," she told Garnet contentedly.

"But aren't you worried about Jem—about what will happen to him?"

"Bless you, miss. He'll be all right. My Jemmy can look after himself. Safe and sound, he'll be, you mark my words."

She prepared to return to her work, only turning in the doorway to add, "I knew 'twould all come out right, for the Devil's moon is over and done with at last. There'll be a new moon tonight, Miss Garnet."

As the day wore on, the clammy mists dispersed, and a thin watery sun dared to show itself among the gray clouds. By afternoon, it was fine enough for Garnet to take a stroll through the gardens with Dicky Blades. He was in his uniform again, as he had been upon the day he arrived, for now that there was nothing to detain him at Rosewood Hall he had packed his baggage and made ready to depart.

"You're sure you have enough money for the journey?" Garnet asked.

"Yes, of course. I got back most of the cash I'd

lost, thanks to you," he told her. "Besides, I shan't need to spend much on my way to Kenilworth. I intend to press on and get there as soon as I can. I don't plan to pass many nights on the road."

"Your family will be pleased to see you again, I'm sure," said Garnet. "And your fiancée, of course, will be overjoyed."

"Yes, dear old Penelope. I've been away much too long. It'll be good to see her again. . . . All the same, though—" He broke off, looking a little wistful.

"Yes?" Garnet glanced at him as they paced the leafy walks of the rose garden, side by side.

"All the same, I was going to say—I shall miss you, young 'un . . ."

"Oh, what nonsense! You'll soon forget us all once you are on your way home."

"That's not true. I shall never forget Rosewood—and I shall never forget you. How could I?"

She tucked her arm through his, and they continued at a slightly slower pace.

"Dear Dicky, my best of friends. . . . We've been through a great deal together, you and I."

"I can't help thinking, if things had been a little different . . . if I had ever had the faintest notion, all those days and nights we spent as comrades-in-arms—if I had once suspected you were a girl—"

He stopped walking. They were in the shadow of the old summerhouse, and he put one arm about her waist and drew her round to face him. "It could have been something more than friendship, you know."

"No, Dicky, for I love you dearly, but it's a different kind of love. . . . We were brother officers once, and now we are brother and sister—and that is the way it will always be."

"Always?"

"I hope so. You will come back to Rosewood, one day, won't you? And you will bring your wife to meet us. And your children too, I'm sure!"

"Hey, steady on, we're not even married yet, you

NEW MOON

know! Dear old Penelope, she's a sweet girl and a splendid horsewoman, but . . . she ain't *you*, Garnet, and that's a fact."

He stretched out one hand. There, upon a bush sheltered from wind and weather by the summer-house, a single rose remained, the petals a delicate white, tipped at the edges with the faintest blush of pink. Now Dicky snapped it from the twig, and began stripping the thorns from the stem.

"The last rose of summer," he said quietly. "As a farewell to you, a rose without a thorn. A rose—for remembrance."

He gave it to her; and she slipped it into the bosom of her dress. Then she kissed him once, very lightly, upon the cheek.

"Goodbye, Dicky," she said. "Come back again, very soon."

The evenings were drawing in now, and it was almost dark by the time Coral put Blaise to bed. She said his prayers through with him and then sat by him for a while until she was sure that he had fallen asleep. His cot was in the dressing room adjoining the Mallorys' bedroom, and as she sat watching the sleeping child, a shadow fell across the floor.

Coral looked up and put a finger to her lips. Gerard, fitting studs into his ruffled shirt, stood in the doorway, watching them.

"Ssh," she warned him, "he's only just nodded off . . ."

Gerard came and stood beside her, looking down at the cot. The fair-haired boy lay peacefully, the long lashes of his closed eyelids brushing his soft cheeks.

"You must be very proud of him," Coral whispered.

He bent to kiss the nape of her neck, and said under his breath, "I'm very proud of both of you . . ."

They left the dressing room, closing the door qui-

etly so that Blaise might not be disturbed, and continued to make themselves ready for dinner.

"Captain Blades has left us, you know," Gerard said, brushing his hair at the mirror.

"Yes. I said goodbye to him. I think he was a little sorry to go."

"Perhaps. *I* shall not be sorry to go, not now."

She whirled round and stared at him. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that now there is nothing to keep us here. We've spent enough time at Rosewood. You were quite right, we should be on our way."

"On our way—where?"

"Why, to Ireland, of course. Or France, or America. Anywhere we can get together a troupe of actors and begin to work again."

"Oh, Gerard, do you really mean it?"

She flung her arms around him eagerly.

"Of course I do. We've got to make a living for ourselves, and it's the only way I know. It's high time we were off on our travels again."

"Oh, yes," she agreed fervently. "For you know I've gypsy blood in me. I can never settle in any one place for long. I enjoy being upon the road—I even enjoy the journeys . . ."

"Journeys end in lovers' meeting," Gerard reminded her.

"Then our journey will never have an end, for we'll be together all the while." She smiled, her eyes shining. "Now I know you're feeling cheerful again; you always quote from Shakespeare when you're happy."

"Shakespeare, yes." Gerard looked thoughtful. "I was thinking today, sometime we ought to have a shot at the Scottish play . . . full of blood and thunder. It generally goes down well with audiences, they tell me, and there's two splendid parts for you and me, as the Lord and Lady . . ."

"There's only one problem I can see. What are we to do about Blaise? Would we take him with us?"

"Of course we shall! It'll be a first-class education for him. And he can earn his keep, into the bargain as 'Son to Macduff.' Only a few lines, but he'll bring the house down!"

Coral smiled at her husband fondly.

"You know, you're beginning to sound strangely like Uncle Dermot," she told him. "Oh, it *will* be wonderful to set foot on a stage again after so long, but—"

She hesitated, and his arms tightened about her.

"But what?"

"We will always come back here, now and again, won't we? Back to Rosewood?"

"Would you want to?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. For this is your home, and so it is my home too."

He put his lips to hers, and they found one another again in a long embrace that seemed to have no beginning and no end.

Garnet entered the master bedroom, expecting to find Brock there, but the room was empty. Then she heard the splashing of water and realized that he was taking a bath before dinner.

Some time before his death Sir George Mallory had installed a luxurious new bathtub for his own convenience. He had become old and rheumatically, and could not easily negotiate the cramped confines of a hip bath upon the floor, and so, at great expense, he had the first bathtub plumbed into the building and had converted his dressing room to a bathroom. And now Brock enjoyed the benefits of this newfangled innovation.

"Brock? It's me. . . . May I come in?" Garnet called, for the door was ajar.

"Of course you may," came the reply.

She went into the smaller room and began to unfasten her dress, for she too had to change before dinner.

ROSEWOOD

Brock lay back at full length in the huge tub, which was built as solidly as a battleship and surrounded by polished mahogany. Indeed, it was of battleship proportions, for Sir George had not been of small stature, and liked room to spread himself.

Garnet suddenly felt very happy, and blew a kiss at her husband as he relaxed among the soapsuds, with the steam lazily spiraling up to the ceiling.

He cocked an appraising eye at her. "You're looking particularly pleased with yourself tonight, my dear."

"Am I? I feel optimistic again. . . . I can't help it. Everything is going to come right for us now, I can feel it in my bones."

She was undressing as she spoke, and Brock looked her over admiringly, enjoying the pink-and-white gleam of her shoulders as she pulled down the sleeves of her gown. A pink-and-white flower tumbled to the floor, and she picked it up.

"Oh, dear, I should put this in water. . . . Dicky said it was the last rose of summer."

"Did he indeed? Let me see."

Garnet handed it over to him, and he turned the stem between his fingers thoughtfully. "Very pretty. Someone's removed the thorns, I notice."

"Yes, Dicky did that before he gave it to me. It was thoughtful of him."

She continued to undress, removing her gown and hanging it carefully behind the door. Brock examined the rose and then shifted his gaze to Garnet, watching her as she pulled off her petticoat, comparing the pearly tints of her skin with the velvety softness of the rose.

"Come here," he said at last. "It's too beautiful to be tossed aside. You should wear it in your hair."

"Dear Brock. You're a romantic at heart."

Quite nude, she crossed the room to him, and stood by the bathtub while he reached up to fasten the flower into the gleaming tresses at the side of her

NEW MOON

head. It shone there resplendent, more gorgeous than any jewel.

She smiled down at him, and they shared a strange moment of silence; she let her gaze travel over his strong, powerful frame, partly submerged in the tub, and he looked up at her perfect figure, in open admiration.

"It's right that you should be an optimist," he said at last, breaking the spell. "Anyone so beautiful must give happiness—and expect to receive it in return."

She stared at him. "I don't understand what you mean," she said. "I only know—I feel a great weight has been lifted from us all."

She moved away, drifting toward the window. The room could not be overlooked, and Brock had not troubled to draw the curtains.

"Mrs. Bolt was right," she said at last. "There is a new moon tonight, a thin crescent, just above the trees—did you see it?"

"No . . . I was thinking of other things."

"A new moon, and a new life," she continued, almost to herself. "Poor Cassie. I hope—wherever she is—she may find peace too, at last."

"She did not deserve it," said Brock. "For today I discovered yet another example of her deceit. I received a reply to the letter I sent to Yeovil."

"What? From the coachman Nicholas Soames?"

"Yes. He thanked me for my offer of a divorce, but he informed me that such a thing would no longer be necessary, or indeed possible. . . . His wife—my wife, my Lydia—died of consumption three years ago."

"Three years!" Garnet turned from the window. "But that means—"

"It means that the woman's attempt to blackmail me was as false as everything else. It means that you are truly my wife, and have always been so."

"Oh, Brock." She hurried across to the bathtub, and put her hand upon his arm. "It makes no real

difference to us, of course, but . . . I am very glad, all the same."

She stroked his shoulder affectionately and wondered why he still looked so grave, despite such wonderful news. In an attempt to lighten his mood, she asked, "Would you like me to scrub your back?"

"That would be extremely agreeable," he replied.

It wasn't the first time that Garnet had performed this service for her husband, and she always enjoyed it. Working the soap into a fine lather, she began to rub it into the shining skin between his shoulder blades, and as he sat up and leaned forward she massaged the length of his spine.

The regular, rhythmic movements and the slow slapping of water in the tub had an almost hypnotic effect, and neither of them spoke for a while. Then Brock spoke quietly, with his head down, his expression unseen.

"Why did Captain Blades give you a rose?"

Garnet did not pause in her labors, but replied easily, "It was a farewell gesture, a parting gift."

"He finds you very attractive, I think . . . as do many men," Brock continued.

"What are you trying to say to me?" she asked.

"I am trying to find a way of asking you one question," he replied. "And the question is this. On the night when you went to Captain Blades' room and Jem Bolt took a shot at him—the night when we all went out into the garden, as a search party—why was Captain Blades naked under his dressing gown?"

Garnet stopped lathering his back, and sighed.

"Oh, dear. So that's what has been worrying you. Darling Brock, for a clever man, you can be very foolish sometimes."

"Can I?"

"And you are hopelessly far from the truth. For there has never been anything between Dicky Blades and me. Oh, he finds me attractive, perhaps—but I am not interested in him. I like him enormously. He

has been a good friend to me, but I do not love him. I love only one man . . . you know that."

Carefully she stepped over the rim of the bath. There was room for them both in the huge, enameled tub, and she slipped into the water beside him so gently that the surface scarcely rippled.

Putting her arms around his broad muscular torso, she murmured:

"I belong to you, Brock—and to no one else."

He held her close against him, and she could feel the tension in his body.

"Sometimes I cannot help doubting it, doubting myself," he said quietly. "There is such a difference in our ages. . . . Look at me now, look at me as I am—a battered old warrior, with a broken head and a stiff leg. And I ask the question—how can I hope to hold on to such a splendid creature—?"

"You need not ask any questions. Only hold me, keep me close to you—always."

She put up her face to his, and they kissed. She felt the thrill of passion race through her body, making her tingle from head to toe, and their legs moved together with familiar intimacy. The warm soapy water enveloped them, and his firm hands explored every inch of her skin. As his tongue penetrated her lips, she felt the sudden thrust of his manhood against her, and their limbs slid into closer contact.

They were both united now in a magical ritual, his mouth upon hers, his arms enfolding her, his wet naked chest smoothly stroking against her breasts, his thighs between hers—and the surface of the water began to bubble and froth in a whirlpool of excitement.

She gave herself to him totally, and in that moment her hair tumbled about her shoulders, and the flower that Brock had placed there fell into the water with a little splash.

"Oh, the rose—" she gasped. "The last rose . . ."

Already the petals were separating, floating away

ROSEWOOD

one by one among the soap bubbles that surrounded them.

"It's not the last," he said softly, close to her ear. "Wait and see. The roses will bloom next year."

Garnet closed her eyes and clung to him, securely cradled in Brock's love, and heard him whisper:

"There will be many more years for us. . . . And many more roses."